MO XIANG TONG XIU

Heaven Official's Blessing

7

TIAN GUAN CI FU

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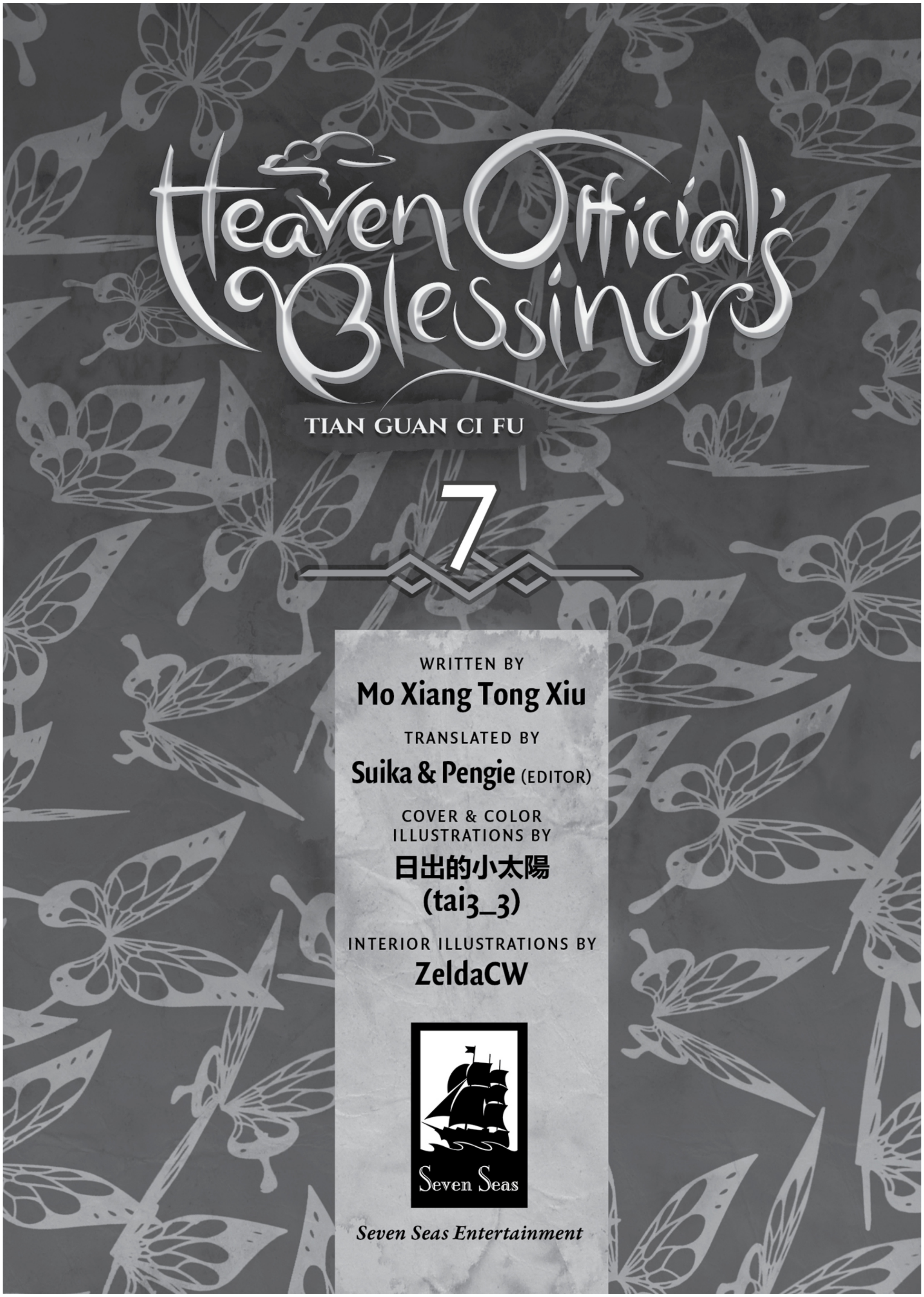

Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

7

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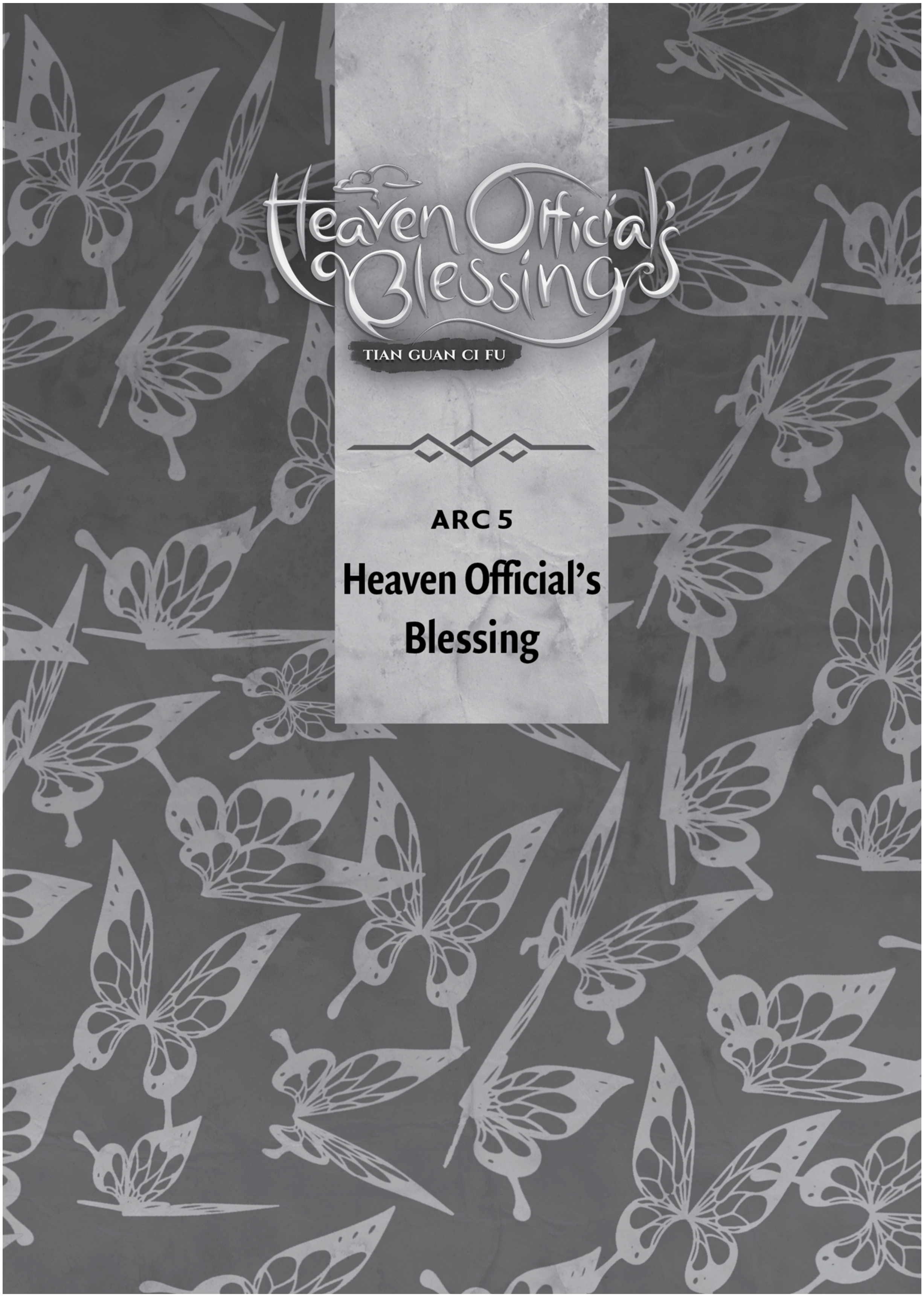


Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

ARC 5

Heaven Official's Blessing

Chapter 105:

Dominate Heaven and Earth, Divine Being Breaks Through the Kiln

XIE LIAN LAY on the hard, unforgiving ground with that half-crying, half-smiling mask stuck to his face. Next to him, White No-Face seemed to be admiring the sight of the appearance that was exactly like his own. The cry-smiling mask was secured to Xie Lian's face with a peculiar force, and he couldn't remove it no matter how he tried.

"Keep it on," White No-Face said. "Stop wasting your strength on these pointless struggles. You want to leave? You'll break out of the Kiln easily as long as you follow my directions."

Xie Lian pretended he didn't exist.

Despite the constant snubs and rebuffs, White No-Face never gave up. He sighed. "We could become the greatest master and disciple—and the best of friends. Why do you insist on rebelling?"

Xie Lian finally stopped his struggle to reply in disgust, "Stop using that tone. Acting like you've seen it all, been through it all… I don't want a teacher or friend like you."

His contempt was on full display, and White No-Face sneered. "I know. In your mind, the only ones who can guide you are the state preceptor and Jun Wu. Am I right?"

His tone was oddly pointed, full of disdain and ridicule. Xie Lian didn't feel like getting tangled up in that particular subject. He asked about something else.

“Was Lang Ying the first crown prince of Yong’an?”

Lang Ying was from Yong’an and had contracted Human Face Disease. The little crown prince was the only possible identity Xie Lian could think of.

“That’s right,” White No-Face replied. “The very same crown prince you knocked out and abandoned in the Palace of Yong’an after hacking the elder Lang Ying’s corpse to pieces. And then you set fire to the place.”

The Yong’an crown prince was Lang Ying’s nephew. He had likely been infected by the remnants of Human Face Disease on Lang Ying’s corpse.

“Why didn’t he pass the disease to anyone else?” Xie Lian then asked.

“The people at the Palace of Yong’an discovered he was infected,” White No-Face replied. “An order was given in secret to suffocate him with a blanket to prevent the disease from spreading. However, he killed his executioner during the struggle and fled.”

At that point, Yong’an had announced to the world that both the King of Yong’an and the crown prince had passed away from severe illness. After the ensuing internal conflict, another of Lang Ying’s nephews was established as the crown prince. That prince was Lang Qianqiu’s ancestor.

“How did you manage to deceive him?” Xie Lian asked.

“I didn’t,” White No-Face replied. “I only told him the truth. I revealed the identity of the criminal responsible for turning him into such a monster. And I swore that as long as he lent me a bit of his spirit, I would help avenge him.”

“You call *that* ‘a bit’?” Xie Lian was incredulous. “You consumed him completely just to feed yourself!”

White No-Face was indifferent. “No one would genuinely care for him, looking like that. He was neither man nor ghost. He was suffering just existing in this world,” he stated blandly.

“Your Royal Highness?” Xie Lian suddenly said.

“…”

In that moment, Xie Lian could tell that the creature had very nearly answered to that address but had stopped himself. Xie Lian probed further.

“You. You’re the Crown Prince of Wuyong, aren’t you?”

The stifling heat of the Kiln grew denser when the words left his lips.

Xie Lian had been pondering that question from the moment he had fallen in here. He could understand the words spewing from the mouths of the corpse-eating rats, which meant that someone had transplanted a portion of their memories and feelings into his mind, and that person knew the language of Wuyong. Of the three possible candidates capable of the feat—Jun Wu, the state preceptor, and White No-Face—Jun Wu had been born after the fall of the Kingdom of Wuyong, but the other two were highly suspicious.

Why had Hua Cheng been cast out of the Kiln? It couldn’t have been because he was already a supreme—Xie Lian had confirmed with him that Supreme Ghost Kings could reenter the Kiln, just as a heavenly official could undergo more Heavenly Tribulations after ascension. And yet he had still vanished halfway through their plunge. The most straightforward explanation Xie Lian could provide was that the Kiln obeyed the command of White No-Face!

And if that were true, what was his most likely real identity?

It was dead silent within the darkness. After a while, Xie Lian repeated with certainty, “You *are* the Crown Prince of Wuyong.”

Finally, White No-Face broke his silence. He lunged at Xie Lian with sharp, powerful strikes. This time, it was Xie Lian’s turn to dodge—he leapt to his feet and pressed the subject further as he evaded the blows.

“Your Highness, I’ve got a question for you. Why don’t you ever show your true face to anyone?”

“Your Highness, I’m warning you—do not address me with that title,” White No-Face replied darkly.

“You call *me* ‘Your Highness,’ so why can’t I do the same?” Xie Lian retorted. “You won’t answer me, so I have to make my own guesses. There are only two reasons why you wouldn’t want me to see your true face: either you’re someone I know or a stranger I could easily identify. Or your real appearance is incredibly ugly, so ugly that you can’t even stand it! Just like—”

He heard two whizzing sounds, and a sharp pain shot up Xie Lian’s arm. White No-Face had seized him with great force.

“My dear crown prince, have I been a little too friendly? Do you think you no longer need to fear me?”

Xie Lian hung on to his consciousness through the pain. He seemed to have truly angered White No-Face; the creature’s tone was thick with frost as he picked up the black sword and slowly raised it to point threateningly at Xie Lian.

“You named this sword ‘Fangxin’?”

As the eerie blade came closer and closer to his throat, Xie Lian watched it with unblinking eyes, unfazed. “Is that a problem?”

White No-Face scoffed. “You don’t know how to name things. Listen well—this sword’s original name is ‘Zhuxin.’”[1]

“Who’s there?!” Xie Lian suddenly cried, his eyes wide.

However, White No-Face didn’t bother looking behind him. “You’re trying to use a child’s trick when fighting me?”

Xie Lian was perplexed. “You…didn’t notice?”

“There’s nothing there. What was I meant to notice?” White No-Face asked coldly.

He hadn’t noticed, but Xie Lian certainly had.

The firelight on the ground was reflected in Fangxin’s blade and refracted onto the stone walls around them. And for an instant, Xie Lian had seen a face.

He could swear he wasn’t mistaken—he had seen a human face, an *enormous* human face! White No-Face’s cultivation was surely stronger than Xie Lian’s, so how could he possibly miss it? Unless…something even more terrifying than White No-Face was lurking here!

The glimpse he’d had was very brief, but he still remembered what he’d seen. The face had all five features, and…it looked familiar. Xie Lian felt a slight chill run down his spine.

“There’s something else in here!”

However, White No-Face replied, “Aside from you and me, there is nothing but stone and lava inside the Kiln.”

Xie Lian was about to say more when sudden realization dawned on him. *Wait…stone? And a familiar face?*

So…that's it!

He suddenly knew exactly what he'd seen.

The moment he understood, Xie Lian's hands began to rapidly form seals behind his back.

White No-Face noticed his movements. "It's pointless, even if you —"

Yet before he could finish, there was a deafening cracking sound, and a storm of rocks and earth tumbled from above. White No-Face sensed something coming and swiftly flashed away to dodge the attack. He was fast, of course—there was no one faster. He should've been able to dodge perfectly. Unfortunately, the thing attacking him was just too big.

It was a giant hand with fingers balled into a fist. That fist came crashing heavily down…right on top of White No-Face!

The massive hand was made of stone, and it really was too big—that single fist was as large as a mansion. The firelight on the ground could only illuminate that one body part—everything above the wrist was still awash in darkness.

Amidst the sound of splitting rock, the hand flipped over and opened its palm toward Xie Lian. Despite its size, its fingers were long and slender, with fine, delicate joints—it was a hand both gentle enough to hold a flower and tough enough to wield a sword. In one smooth motion, Xie Lian quickly grabbed Fangxin and jumped up from the ground, then leapt into the heart of the palm.

Just as the hand was about to hoist him higher, Xie Lian suddenly cried “Wait!” as he remembered something.

He jumped down to grab his bamboo hat, then leapt back up.

The giant hand lifted him into the air, drawing farther and farther away from the firelight. Xie Lian could feel himself being lifted higher and higher, and his hands formed a series of seals once again.

“Break out!”

With that command, he felt a subtle falling sensation as if the giant holding him had bent its knees to prepare for a mighty leap. A moment later, Xie Lian felt himself crushed back against the hand. The giant had launched itself toward the sky, crashing against the sealed mouth of the volcano!

Rumble… Rumble… Rumble…!

Amidst the violent tremors, Xie Lian heard the extremely clear sound of stones splitting—the rock was about to shatter, unable to withstand such a violent attack.

A stream of light leaked in from above.

He had broken through!

The sealed top of the Kiln had been cracked open, and blinding white light came pouring through. Whirling winds twisted inside, shrieking and howling.

Xie Lian stood on the giant’s palm, one hand pressing the bamboo hat down on his head while another blocked his face from the snowstorm. The stifling hot air was swept cleanly away, and Xie Lian took a deep breath of fresh, freezing air and shouted:

“San Lang—!”

The first syllable was still echoing in the air when a pair of arms pulled him into an embrace from behind. Xie Lian stiffened at first, but he relaxed when he looked down and saw red sleeves and silver vambraces circling his waist.

A deep, forlorn voice came from above his ear. “…I was about to lose my mind!”

Xie Lian hurried to turn around. He cupped his captor’s cheeks with his hands and soothed him, “Don’t…don’t. I’m here…I’m out!”

Hua Cheng stood before him. His raven hair was mussed, and there was a lost look in his eye. He gripped the cry-smiling mask Xie Lian hadn’t been able to remove no matter how hard he tried, easily tore it off, and tossed it away.

Xie Lian had cupped Hua Cheng’s cheeks on instinct, and he couldn’t pinpoint exactly why he was doing it—surely it was to comfort him, but perhaps he was also worried Hua Cheng would get frostbite from the snowstorm. After all, for as long as Xie Lian had been in the Kiln, Hua Cheng had been out here guarding the mouth of the volcano.

They had jumped in together so easily, and Hua Cheng was thrown outside so abruptly. He’d had no idea what was going on inside; of course he was about to lose his mind!

Hua Cheng held Xie Lian tightly and spoke in a low voice touched by despair. “…I couldn’t get into the Kiln no matter what I tried, and you had to break out on your own! I’m so fucking—”

“San Lang, it’s okay—it’s really all right!” Xie Lian said quickly. “Besides, I didn’t break out on my own!”

Hua Cheng finally calmed down a little. “What? Gege, how did you get out?”

“You helped me,” Xie Lian replied. “Look.”

He gestured upward, and Hua Cheng’s eyes followed.

A giant sculpture of a man carved from mountain rock stood amidst the snow and wind, flurries swirling about its face. It almost looked like it was holding up the heavens and keeping the earth grounded. The two of them were standing in the heart of that giant statue’s palm.

The contours of its face were gentle and beautiful. Long brows with elegant eyes, refined lips with slightly upturned corners—almost a smile. It seemed affectionate but not frivolous, expressionless but not unkind. It was a face of compassion and beauty.

That face was Xie Lian’s own!

Xie Lian raised his head to look at it. “Is this the one you told me about? The best divine statue you ever sculpted?” he asked softly.

Hua Cheng gazed up at it as well. It was a long while before his eyes fell back on the man beside him. “…Yes.”

He must have sculpted this enormous divine statue while he was trapped inside the Kiln enduring intense trials and immense suffering. It had been hidden inside the darkest recesses of Mount Tonglu for centuries; part of it was still covered with ivy. The perilous Kiln served as its natural cavern, and it was the only god of that uniquely spectacular cave.

It and the Kiln were of one body, made from the same material. It wouldn’t have been able to break out of the volcano if it had been carved from ordinary stone; it would have shattered to pieces in the attempt. It surely never would have awakened and moved to begin with if Xie Lian himself hadn’t issued the command, or if Hua Cheng hadn’t given him spiritual power before they jumped down.

Xie Lian turned to Hua Cheng. “So, San Lang, I made it out. We broke through together.”

Suddenly, they were shaken by a wave of tremors. Their smiles faded, replaced by tension and vigilance.

“What’s going on?” Xie Lian wondered with slight nervousness. “Is the divine statue shaking? It’s not going to collapse, is it?”

The Kiln’s seal was made of massive million-ton rocks laden with evil. If the giant stone statue fell apart because it breached the entrance, he would feel awful—after all, this was the best divine statue that Hua Cheng had ever sculpted for him.

“Don’t worry, it’s fine. It’s the mountain that’s shaking,” Hua Cheng said.

Sure enough, a heavy sheet of snow collapsed below them. The body of the mountain was already exposed in some spots. It seemed something else was about to break through the Kiln.

Hua Cheng stood in front of Xie Lian, shielding him.

“It’s White No-Face,” Xie Lian said flatly.

Of course White No-Face couldn’t be squashed dead by a punch from this giant divine statue—that blow would make the creature falter for a moment at most. Xie Lian was on high alert, and not a moment later, both of them were hit head-on by a gust of scorching hot air.

The scalding air erupted from the abyss of the volcano, reeking of sulfur. Xie Lian’s instincts pricked with imminent danger.

“Gege, go!” Hua Cheng said darkly.

Xie Lian formed a hand seal and leapt onto the giant statue’s wrist with Hua Cheng in tow. They ran up its arm, then stopped to stand on its shoulder. At Xie Lian’s command, the divine statue set off with a gigantic stride, going along with the rolling current of snow. A single slide carried them several kilometers and created waves of snow that crashed around its body. Because both its arms were open, it maintained good balance despite its million-ton body.

They’d only slid halfway down when the entire mountain began to quake harder with a massive rumbling sound. The tremors made the divine statue stagger.

They looked up to see that a pitch-black pillar of smoke had burst forth from the mountain’s peak!

Xie Lian was struck speechless by the earth-shattering noise and the calamitous pillar. In an instant, the entire sky was blackened by a thick cloud of smoke. Countless tangled human faces and limbs tumbled within those sun-concealing black clouds—a horrifying sight. He had only ever witnessed a scene like this once, centuries ago, but here it was again!

"That's…?" Xie Lian gaped.

"Souls of the fallen from the Kingdom of Wuyong," Hua Cheng replied solemnly.

Every person in Wuyong who had been buried alive by the volcanic eruption was probably in there.

"Gege," Hua Cheng alerted, "down below, about a hundred meters away!"

The moment he spoke, Xie Lian directed the giant stone statue to smash down with its right hand.

A white-clothed man stood in the equally white field of snow around a hundred meters away from them—White No-Face. He seemed to be one with the landscape, but he couldn't deceive their eyes. The smash brought forth thick, heavy waves of snow that surged like an enormous white tsunami—however, the strike did not hit its target.

White No-Face was prepared this time, since he had already fallen for that move back in the darkness of the Kiln. His white figure disappeared in a flash, and in the next second, he appeared at the giant divine statue's knee. Without a moment of hesitation, the divine statue aimed another strike at its own kneecap. Xie Lian noticed with a start while the slap was still in motion and forcibly pulled it back with gritted teeth.

Phew, that was close! he thought.

The giant stone statue had breached the Kiln's seal by brute force alone. Had Xie Lian been unable to regain control and allowed it to smash its own kneecap, the direct strike might have resulted in lost limbs—perhaps that was why White No-Face had intentionally hopped on. Xie Lian immediately halted the statue's movement, while Hua Cheng languidly pulled out his long, slender silver scimitar.

"Get the hell off," he ordered White No-Face.

White No-Face looked up at them.

"This divine statue isn't for you to taint," Hua Cheng stated coldly.

Suddenly, Xie Lian exclaimed, "San Lang!"

He pointed at the Kiln's summit. Behind the pillar of black smoke there was something flowing out—something crimson and gold and burning.

Lava!

The crimson-gold lava rolled and mixed with the black smoke, enveloping the skies and the earth. It flowed down from the mouth of the Kiln.

White No-Face took this chance to leap and disappear into the snow.

Xie Lian didn't have the mind to catch him. He shouted, "Run!"

The giant divine statue heard his order and took off with a large stride. It leaped down the slopes with great thumps, and when it landed flat on its feet at Mount Tonglu's base, the ground moved and the mountain shook.

Although the statue was swift, the lava and black smoke were as well—the flow was practically biting at its ankles. Xie Lian didn't dare to stick around after landing; he directed the divine statue to rise to its feet and continue its flight, carrying them with it. As they ran and ran, Xie Lian could feel it beginning to slow. Seized by dread and confusion, he wondered if he might have just been imagining it—but then Xie Lian felt himself hang in the air for a moment before plunging downward. The divine statue had stopped obeying his command and come to a halt on one knee.

Once it was kneeling, its body slowly pitched forward, as if it was physically exhausted and about to faint. Xie Lian's heart jumped to his throat.

Oh no… It was going to collapse, and the torrent of fiery black smoke was about to catch up!

Just then, Xie Lian felt something tighten around his waist. Hua Cheng had wrapped an arm around him and pulled him to his side. He lifted Xie Lian's chin with his other hand, then pressed his chilled lips to Xie Lian's own.

"…"

Xie Lian's eyes widened as a rush of cool, refreshing air filled his lungs. It seemed to flow through his limbs, invigorating his entire body.

The kiss was brief, and Hua Cheng drew back soon afterward, lips parted.

"Gege, try standing up again!"

Xie Lian snapped out of it and reformed his hand seals. Moments before the stone statue fell to the ground face-first, it flung out its arms to support itself.

Then it rose to its feet once more!

The stone statue hadn't just *seemed* exhausted—it actually *was* exhausted. It took an insane amount of spiritual power to control a statue that huge, and the little that Hua Cheng had lent him earlier was already burned out, making it slow and sway on the brink of collapse. But now, injected with a fresh burst of spiritual power, it jumped back to life, faster and more agile than before.

"Gege, run faster!" Hua Cheng urged.

Xie Lian wanted to do just that, but he was afraid the control spell took too much power. "Can we really make it go faster? What if the spiritual power runs out?!" he asked, uncertain.

"It won't. Just focus on running!" Hua Cheng assured him next to his ear. "Don't ever be afraid—I'm right here beside you!"

Hua Cheng was right behind him, his hands steady on Xie Lian's waist. He was just one person, but to Xie Lian, it felt like the entire world was supporting him. He breathed in deeply and closed his eyes.

"All right."

Xie Lian extended his arms forward and unleashed all his spiritual power, offering up the mightiest of hand seals.

"Run—!" he shouted.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

The huge divine statue ran wildly, each step spanning kilometers—it crossed gullies with one step, leapt over hills with the next. Sure enough, it soon left the black clouds and lava far behind.

It was certainly the largest, most conspicuous thing around; every step was like a meteor crash, sending out waves of forceful tremors.

The countless nefarious creatures around Mount Tonglu were terrified by the wild shaking of the ground, their faces going pale. Many could see the black clouds swirling and spreading in the sky when they looked up, and while it was somewhat impressive, they didn’t really pay it much mind—within the Tonglu mountains, bizarre sights were to be expected. And those looked like vengeful spirits within the black clouds, right? That was a sight they saw every day, since they were similar beings. What was there to be afraid of?

Yet the sight of an enormous divine statue of a martial god stomping past was the thing that stunned them—what was *that* thing?!

Howls and wails erupted from all around. “What an enormous man! *Aaaaaaaah!*” They’d never seen such a massive, terrifying statue before.

Xie Lian wanted to detour around the royal capital of Wuyong to keep his divine statue from trampling and destroying any of the ancient houses holding two millennia of history, but then he remembered something.

“San Lang! Are General Pei, Lord Rain Master, and the others nearby?”

“Yes,” Hua Cheng replied.

“Go back, go back! We’ve left something behind! Let’s go get them and carry them away!” Xie Lian quickly called out.

The giant stone statue had already passed the target, so it backed up a few steps at the order. Just as it was about to turn around, Xie Lian felt his body jerk. He lost his footing and was thrown into the air.

Only once he was in midair did he realize what had happened—the divine statue had tripped!

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng landed steadily on the statue’s chest. As Xie Lian worked to get it to stand back up, he looked ahead. It wasn’t some mistake on his part that tripped the huge figure—it was something else.

A lofty mountain.

This mountain was far smaller than the Kiln itself, but it was still a bit bigger than the giant stone statue. Xie Lian was certain they had never climbed such a mountain when they first passed through this area. His eyes moved past it to take in the figures behind.

Sure enough, there were two other mountains of similar size right there. The three massive mountains were blocking the statue’s path forward.

“Gege, be careful,” Hua Cheng said. “Those are the ‘guards’ of Mount Tonglu: Old Age, Sickness, and Death.”

The huge statue was still crawling slowly to its feet when the first mountain spirit crashed over.

Xie Lian remembered Hua Cheng telling him that these three mountains had given him a hell of a time during his first visit to Mount Tonglu, so he didn’t dare underestimate their power. He planned to make the statue jump and flip over to avoid them, but he’d never commanded something so huge and unwieldy to carry out such a complicated maneuver, so it came out confused. He didn’t manage to jump before being knocked down again.

Rumble, rumble. The heavens shook, the earth quaked, and the giant stone statue destroyed an entire street as it fell near the royal capital of Wuyong. Every movement made loud cracking noises—the sound of magnificent houses, temples, and the palace being crushed to pieces. Xie

Lian was almost thrown off again by all the shaking, but Hua Cheng firmly grabbed his hand.

"Come with me!" he exclaimed.

In a few long steps, he took Xie Lian and leapt onto the giant divine statue's head. The massive flower-crowned martial god wore an ornamental headpiece to tie up its hair, which resembled a small terrace. They hopped onto the crown, finally finding a place to settle on the statue that was much steadier than the shoulder or palm.

They had no time to relax before the mountain spirit came at them again. The giant stone statue stumbled back a few steps, but fortunately, Xie Lian was prepared this time and wasn't knocked down—though he accidentally trampled another cluster of houses. Xie Lian couldn't help but ache for them and prayed for forgiveness in his mind.

Clumsily controlling the divine statue, trying to make it slip away while avoiding the houses, Xie Lian wondered in baffled confusion, "Why do they keep chasing me and trying to take me down? What did I do?"

"It's not that they're targeting gege specifically—they'll chase and fight anyone. Gege is just particularly conspicuous right now."

"Such a large creature *is* rather conspicuous, I guess…"

Before Xie Lian could finish his thought, the three mountain spirits besieged them together. They surrounded the giant stone statue and pressed firmly inward, trying to crush the statue to pieces. The divine statue couldn't move a single limb, nor could Xie Lian. He poured all of his strength into getting the statue to push them back, but it didn't budge—and at that point, it was probably powerless to fight back!

As he tried to think of another way to escape, he unconsciously took a step backward and bumped into a chest. When he looked back, Hua Cheng grasped his shoulders.

“Fight freely! It’ll be fine—none of them are a match for you. Nothing in this world can stop you!”

His chest was the strongest backing in existence, and in an instant, Xie Lian was brimming with confidence. A refreshing current flowed through his body, and he struck back with all his might.

At last, he broke through their siege!

Rumble, rumble. The three mountain spirits were forced nearly half a kilometer away. Dust flew, rocks rolled, smoke and debris billowed—but they were only pushed back for a moment before closing in, ready to attack again. Xie Lian’s hands quickly formed several hand seals.

“Do…not…block…my…*way*!”

The giant stone statue leapt into the air and landed its feet on the heads of two of the mountain spirits. Its hand rested on the hilt of the sword hung on its waist, and then he unsheathed the blade!

The giant figure completed the actions fluently, the string of movements flowing like streams of clouds and water, magnificent and forceful without a hint of hesitation—the statue was no different from its inspiration.

After drawing a breath, Xie Lian shouted, “I’ll cut y—uh, I won’t cut you yet! Hold on…!”

He was fully prepared to cleave valleys into those mountains with a swing of his glorious sword, but something didn’t feel quite right when he pulled it out. When he looked up, he was shocked speechless. The giant stone statue had certainly unsheathed its sword, but…there was only a hilt in its hand.

What was going on? Where was the blade?!

Xie Lian was flummoxed. Hua Cheng's expression dropped, and he pressed two fingers to his forehead, looking troubled as he explained.

"Gege, I'm sorry. I forgot to mention…I didn't carve a blade for this divine statue. This is my fault."

"…"

Of course!

Hua Cheng had carved this statue into the Kiln's inner stone walls in a standing posture. The sword at its waist was concealed beneath its sleeves and the many layers of its flowing robes, so only the hilt had been visible—and thus, it was the only part he'd carved. Obviously, a blade wouldn't magically appear just because the statue had gotten an injection of spiritual power and started to move.

Hua Cheng frowned slightly, his expression solemn. "This was a miscalculation on my part. It's not perfect enough. Next time, I'll carve out every detail."

Xie Lian could tell he was serious and quickly said, "…No, no, no, it's absolutely perfect. Really!"

In any case, there was no blade, so the mountains couldn't be cut. Thus, Xie Lian quickly changed battle tactics—from attacking to absconding.

He hastily directed the giant stone statue to jump from the heads of the two mountain spirits. Tossing the useless stone hilt behind, it stretched its legs and continued its mad dash. The two stood on the crown atop the divine statue's head. Wild winds blew at them, sending their black hair, white robes, and red sleeves flapping and fluttering. Even though they were fleeing, they painted a beautiful image.

A silver butterfly flew next to Xie Lian's ear and transmitted some voices. He caught the butterfly and called out to it, "Is this Feng Xin and Mu Qing? And Lord Rain Master and General Pei?"

Sure enough, familiar voices came from the butterfly.

"I say, Your Highness," Pei Ming said, "there's no need to ask your questions so loud!"

"Ah, sorry. I have too much spiritual power at the moment. Let me get it under better control," Xie Lian said.

"…"

Mu Qing's voice could be heard next. "What? Did you just say you have too much spiritual power? *You?*"

"Have you all met up?" Xie Lian asked. "Where are you?"

"We joined General Pei, General Pei Junior, and the others. Everyone is in the woods near the Wuyong River. We're about to retreat toward the outside," Mu Qing said.

Feng Xin's voice came. "What's happening on your end? We just felt some strange, strong activity from near the Kiln! Do you need us to come help?"

"No!" Xie Lian quickly replied. "Just stay where you are, and we'll come pick you all up very soon—we'll talk then! Ah, we're already here!"

The dried-up Wuyong River lay ahead, and the giant stone statue crossed the gully and crouched beside the dense forest. Xie Lian saw Feng Xin and Mu Qing come out of the woods, looking around and seeming to search for them. However, they were looking in the wrong direction—they never thought to look up, so they didn't see Xie Lian and Hua Cheng at all.

"Your Highness, are you not here yet? Where are you?" Feng Xin said to the butterfly.

Xie Lian cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled toward the ground, "I'm here! Up, look up! Above your heads!"

"…"

Only then did the pair notice that they were standing in a gigantic shadow. They slowly raised their heads, and it was then that they saw an incomparably gigantic "Xie Lian" crouching at the forest's edge and staring down at them. There was even a very Xie-Lian-ish friendly smile on its face.

Without bothering to spare a glance for the two below, Hua Cheng stood languidly to the side with his arms crossed. Xie Lian waved at the ground.

"Do you see me?! Up here!"

The visual shock of this gigantic "Xie Lian" was simply too great, however, and it was impossible to notice anything else at first glance.

Mu Qing's entire field of view was overtaken by the statue's face, and he mumbled, "I…I haven't gone mad, have I?"

Feng Xin's eyes were also filled with that face, and he mumbled, "…What the fuck, what the fuck, what the actual fuck, what in the fucking world is that thing?!"

“Uh…” Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng arched his brows, looking as if it was taking immense effort to hold back a snicker. Honestly, no one had ever seen such a large and incredibly realistic divine statue. The largest known divine statue up until now was one of Jun Wu, but even it was only half the size of this massive sculpture…

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were both deep in shock, and Xie Lian had to call out to them a few times before they found where the real one was located. The rest of the group emerged from the woods one after the other, and almost all of them were so stunned by the sight of the giant divine statue above them that they nearly twisted their necks and ankles looking at it. Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, so he simply had the giant divine statue place an open palm on the ground.

“The Kiln’s volcano has erupted. Fires are going to ravage this area soon, and those three mountain spirits are likely close behind too. Hop on, quick—I’ll carry all of you away!”

The party climbed into the statue’s hand, and everyone found a place to settle. From where he stood atop the crown, Xie Lian could smell the choking scent of sulfur. When he looked back, he saw black smoke and flying dust rapidly closing in. He closed the giant divine statue’s palm and directed it to stand and resume its flight with large strides.

After Pei Ming and the others got over their initial shock, they were fine. But Feng Xin and Mu Qing never quite regained their senses—probably because they were both so familiar with the face, demeanor, and physique of the divine statue’s subject, and thus were particularly disturbed to see it all so immensely magnified.

“Who did this? Who carved this?” Feng Xin asked from his perch on the divine statue’s shoulder, still mired in disbelief. “How come I’ve never seen this thing before? I never even heard it existed!”

“There’s much out there you’ve never seen,” Hua Cheng said with a fake-looking smile.

Although he didn’t clarify, almost everyone came to the same conclusion, especially Feng Xin and Mu Qing. *This* guy was responsible!

“This is incredible…” Mu Qing said. “How are you moving this thing? How much spiritual power is it taking—do you have enough? I thought you didn’t have any at all.”

This time, Hua Cheng didn’t answer. Xie Lian stole a glance at him and pressed his fist to his own lips before attempting an ambiguous answer.

“Um, well…”

“If you don’t have any, you can borrow some, right? It’s a simple thing,” Pei Ming said.

“Ha ha ha ha, yeah…”

The nefarious creatures along the way had realized that things were going wrong—lava poured and fires blazed madly. When they saw people climbing the giant stone statue, they all cried out.

“Wait for me too!”

“Me, me, me—I’m coming too!”

“Take us, take us!”

But Hua Cheng replied, “Get the hell off.”

A wave of silver butterflies flew forth, shimmering with chilling light, and soon they could hear wailing and howling down below. Yin Yu, cradling a sleeping Guzi, called out to the pair at the statue's crown.

"Chengzhu! Your Highness! The empty-shelled people and corpse-eating rats all started rampaging earlier! They're moving in large groups—it looked like they were trying to leave Mount Tonglu's domain!"

The Rain Master was riding the black ox rather than the giant statue, and she watched the sky intently. "The creatures inside the black clouds also seem to want to fly outside."

Her observation was correct. The creatures writhing inside the black clouds were vengeful spirits that hungered for fresh, living flesh to possess, which would allow them to metamorphose into Human Face Disease. There weren't any living humans inside the ring of mountains that enclosed Mount Tonglu, only nefarious creatures and a few heavenly officials they couldn't penetrate. Of course they wanted to get outside. Dragging long tails of black smoke, millions of contorted human faces swirled like deformed worms and snakes in the sky above.

Although his hands trembled, still Xie Lian said, "Mount Tonglu has a barrier. Nothing outside can get in, and nothing inside can get out. Those vengeful spirits shouldn't be able to escape for now—"

Yet Hua Cheng grabbed his hand before he could finish speaking. Xie Lian's heart tensed at the gesture, and he quickly clutched Hua Cheng's hand back.

"What is it? Did I drain too much? Sorry, sorry, I should have been more careful to conserve it—"

"That's not it," Hua Cheng said, covering his right eye with one hand. "Gege, you don't have to worry about that. It's Mount Tonglu's barrier—it's been broken."

“What?” Xie Lian asked, stunned. “Broken?”

He had only just said that they didn’t need to worry because of the barrier. What the heck?!

“Broken,” Hua Cheng confirmed. “White No-Face probably did it. Those things are about to get outside.”

Chapter 106:
Taking the Helm, Four Martial Gods Transform into a Sword

IF THE VENGEFUL SPIRITS made it outside, wouldn’t that unleash a third epidemic of Human Face Disease?

“We have to find a way to stop them!” Xie Lian cried out urgently.

Perched on the statue’s shoulder below, Mu Qing’s black robes and hair were thoroughly mussed and windswept. “But how?!”

The giant stone statue abruptly stopped, rousing clouds of dust and sand.

“Everyone, hold your breath!”

The flying black smoke that was hot on their trail had finally caught up. The giant stone statue raised a hand and struck; the wind generated by the blow shook the heavens and quaked the earth. If it had been lower to the ground, the gale could have uprooted centuries-old trees. Although some of the black smoke was broken up and blown away, Xie Lian still couldn’t help but think, *If only it had a sword!*

“Gege,” Hua Cheng said, sounding like he could tell what Xie Lian was thinking, “there’s a way to get a sword.”

“How?” Xie Lian replied eagerly.

“We’ll have to see if your heavenly colleagues down there are willing.”

“If you’ve got an idea, just say it! Stop dragging it out and feeding him your bullshit!” Feng Xin said.

Xie Lian had pretty much guessed what Hua Cheng was implying, however. “Are you saying that we should have General Pei and the others come together and transform into a sword?”

“That’s right,” Hua Cheng said. “Heavenly officials’ powers are restricted in Mount Tonglu territory, but there are several martial gods here. If four of them transform into one spirit body and work in unison, their might should be considerable.”

Pei Ming was the first to respond. “I think it’s doable.”

“Is it really?” Mu Qing was still doubtful. “How many martial gods do we have? Three, right?”

Pei Xiu and Yin Yu’s powers were completely gone, and the Rain Master wasn’t a martial god. The only ones who could come together were Pei Ming, Feng Xin, and Mu Qing.

“No, there are four. Qi Ying is here too,” Pei Ming replied.

“Huh?”

Yin Yu hesitated for a moment. With one hand still holding Guzi, the other dug out a budaoweng doll. Before the seal was released, the doll unexpectedly began to shake wildly and shriek at an ear-piercing volume. The awful noise forced everyone to cover their ears. Yin Yu hastily sealed the doll anew, digging out a different budaoweng as he nervously explained himself.

“Sorry about that, I grabbed the wrong one. That was the Green Ghost Qi Rong. This is the right doll.”

He tossed the budaoweng in the air, and it exploded into red smoke. A young man appeared within the mist, then plummeted toward the ground.

The giant divine statue lifted a hand to catch him, and the young man flipped upright and landed steadily in its palm. He scratched beneath his bloody curls as he looked up, confused at the sight of the large group of people.

Although Yin Yu had snuck behind someone's back to hide, Quan Yizhen discovered him straightaway and leapt to his feet with a joyous cry.

"Shixiong!"

"…"

Quan Yizhen came bounding over. The mere sight of his face gave Yin Yu a headache; he'd rather listen to Qi Rong shriek for three days and three nights than speak one more word to Quan Yizhen.

Fortunately, Pei Ming snatched Quan Yizhen away. "Come, come, time to get to work, Qi Ying. Have your reunion after we're done!"

Quan Yizhen was profoundly confused. He was already biased against Pei Ming and seemed ready to punch him in the face, but then he looked up and saw Xie Lian atop the statue. Xie Lian's hands were pressed together in prayer, offering up a sincere plea to Quan Yizhen.

"Please and thank you, Qi Ying."

"…"

While he still had no idea what was going on, he scratched his head and joined the ranks.

Mu Qing certainly had an opinion about becoming a sword for another martial god, but he couldn't just say he wouldn't do it now that they'd managed to put together a group of four. He stayed silent.

The four of them formed a line upon the divine statue's palm: Pei Ming, then Feng Xin, then Quan Yizhen, and then Mu Qing.

Hua Cheng propped an elbow on the edge of the jade crown and glanced down.

"Aren't those last two reversed?" he commented.

Logically, ordering them Pei Ming, Feng Xin, Mu Qing, Quan Yizhen would make more sense because Quan Yizhen's spiritual powers weren't as stable as the others'. If the sword was swung too aggressively while he was positioned in the middle, it might snap in half.

"No, they're not," Xie Lian replied, wiping sweat from his face. "Feng Xin and Mu Qing can't be next to each other—they might start fighting halfway through a swing. We need someone in between to separate them."

Hua Cheng quirked his brows at that. His expression seemed to say, *"Please let them beat each other to death, that'd be great."*

When they looked down again, spiritual light had begun to shine from the four's bodies. It shone stronger and stronger, spreading out until the four had merged into one. Finally, they became a sword of spiritual light.

The moment the sword took shape, the giant stone statue tossed it into the air, then reached up and grabbed it.

With a sharp sword in hand, Xie Lian was like a tiger given wings, his might increasing exponentially as he struck!

The vengeful spirits trailed black smoke in long tails and screeched as the sword of spiritual light slashed down, then were abruptly silenced. Riding the tailwinds of victory, Xie Lian's sword danced like a wild shower of petals, slicing and shattering millions of ghosts to pieces like the wind blowing clouds into wisps. Wherever the blade swept, it was like fireworks exploding in the sky, beautiful to behold. The nefarious creatures down below were stupefied by the display, and only when the thousand-ton boots of the giant stone statue came stomping nearby did they remember to flee.

As Xie Lian was engrossed in his sword work, the giant stone statue stumbled forward, almost falling. Xie Lian hastily used the sword to catch its fall, steadying it.

"Your Highness, what's going on?" asked the martial gods who made up the sword array.

"Keep fighting! They're gathering again!"

After controlling the giant stone statue for so long, Xie Lian was getting tired. Sweat dripped down his face, and tension had seized his mind.

"It's nothing! Just…"

It was just that he'd burned up all the spiritual power he had—that's all!

He whipped his head around. Hua Cheng was standing so close behind him, like he was about to reach out. Xie Lian stopped caring about anything else and went right for it—he pounced on Hua Cheng, cupped his cheeks with his hands, and then, getting up on his toes slightly to reach, he closed his eyes and pressed their lips together.

"…" said Feng Xin.

"…" said Mu Qing.

"…?" said Quan Yizhen.

"Ho ho," said Pei Ming.

But it wasn’t enough. Since they were already in that position, Xie Lian thought he might as well take a bit more—he wound his arms tightly around Hua Cheng’s neck to deepen the kiss. All the fatigue he’d been feeling was swept away in an instant as his body was refilled with spiritual power.

The enormous sword of spiritual light in the giant stone statue’s grip clamored with riotous noise.

“What is this?!” Feng Xin cried, clearly shaken. “What are you two doing?! Your Highness?!”

Xie Lian choked—only then did he break away. He didn’t dare look down.

“I’m b-borrowing spiritual power!” he shouted to the sky. “I’m just borrowing his spiritual power! It’s all very proper!”

Mu Qing was shaken too. “You don’t need to do that to borrow spiritual power, though! Couldn’t you just slap your palms together?!”

“Ha ha ha ha! You saw through me!” Xie Lian babbled—he didn’t even know what he was saying. “So maybe it’s not just to borrow spiritual power! Ha ha ha ha…”

Seeing him like this made Hua Cheng join his laughter. He cupped Xie Lian’s face with his hands to guide him back, then leaned down and dropped a kiss on his forehead.

“Don’t be nervous, gege,” he said gently.

“…”

Strange as it was, this returned Xie Lian to normal. He pretended he hadn’t heard Feng Xin and Mu Qing and grew solemn, forming hand seals once more. The giant stone statue pulled the sword of spiritual light from the ground and started slashing and cutting wildly like its strength was inexhaustible.

Quan Yizhen was suddenly filled with awe and respect. “So he really *was* borrowing spiritual power just now! He got stronger so fast.”

“Complete bullshit. What do you know—” Mu Qing couldn’t help but exclaim, but he quickly stopped himself and forcibly changed his tune, likely deciding there was no need to explain this to a man-child like Quan Yizhen. “Yes, that’s right, he was borrowing spiritual power.”

Pei Ming laughed heartily. “That’s right, indeed. But you can’t borrow spiritual power like that so casually. Understand, Qi Ying?”

Feng Xin gaped. “What are you all saying?! Do you actually believe him?!”

Although the statue’s might had increased, they had no giant net with which to capture the vengeful spirits, and they enveloped the entire sky. Upon seeing the power of the massive god, the spirits began to flee, flapping their tails as if they were oversized tadpoles with human faces.

“After them!” Xie Lian cried.

Yet they only managed a few steps before the giant stone statue slumped over and fell to one side!

There was no warning and no reason for this to happen; Xie Lian had taken plenty of spiritual power just a moment ago and was in excellent form. As he felt them fall, Xie Lian looked down and noticed a massive hole in the divine statue’s leg. Shattered rock fell from the wound, then a figure in white fluttered from it, landed languidly on the ground, and vanished in the blink of an eye—as elusive as a ghost, leaving no trace.

It was White No-Face. He had broken the leg of the divine statue with his bare hands!

With an enormous crash, the giant stone statue fell to the ground. Fortunately, the statue's passengers were not ordinary folk. They reacted quickly, leaping off and landing safely.

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng leapt back onto the divine statue's chest. Xie Lian tried commanding it back up, but it struggled greatly. The giant divine statue sprawled on the ground and writhed with ponderous misery.

"How is it? Can it still stand?" asked Mu Qing from within the sword array.

"Did the power run out again?" Quan Yizhen asked. "Do you need to borrow more?"

"No. This isn't a question of spiritual power," Pei Ming said. "And Qi Ying, there's no need to remember any of that. Forget it completely."

"It's probably severely injured…" Xie Lian said. "It shouldn't move again."

While rocks felt no pain, the injured leg would probably fall off completely if they forced the statue to stand and fight. It wasn't just that its attack power was drastically reduced…but this was Hua Cheng's most heartfelt masterpiece and Xie Lian's favorite divine statue. It'd hurt him to see it destroyed like that.

Seeing that their enemy had collapsed, the vengeful spirits in the air danced wildly with mad joy and scattered. Were they just going to watch while those creatures escaped to the outside? Xie Lian glanced over and saw dark anger on Hua Cheng's face—anger toward White No-Face. He hummed for a moment, then spoke.

“Gege…”

Just then, a ray of dazzling light peeked through the dense, thick black clouds, like some shining radiance had appeared above them.

Soon after, they saw a second ray, then a third, then a fourth…

Countless rays of dazzling light shot down, penetrating the gloomy clouds and piercing the vengeful spirits!

This white spiritual light, strong enough to blind, was a familiar sight to the heavenly officials present. After all, it was this very aura that endlessly shone upon the Heavenly Capital.

Jun Wu had arrived!

Chapter 107:
White Emperor Comments on the Mysterious State Preceptor

THE ENDLESS LEGIONS of vengeful spirits dispersed and dissipated under the powerful glare of that spiritual light. A martial god clad in white armor broke through the clouds with sword in hand.

It was indeed Jun Wu. When the group saw him, it was as if they'd seen their parents reborn, or their savior. They all cried, "Ah! My Lord!" with tears practically streaming down their faces.

Each of Jun Wu's steps radiated glory as he languidly descended to earth. "Remain calm, do not panic. Is everyone all right?"

The four within the sword array quickly disassembled and returned to their original forms.

"My Lord, shouldn't you be guarding the Heavenly Capital? Why have you come personally?" Pei Ming asked.

"Lord Rain Master informed me through the communication array that Mount Tonglu's barrier had been broken. The circumstances are dire, and so I have come," Jun Wu replied.

Everyone looked over at the Rain Master, still riding atop the black ox. *So that's what happened,* they all thought at once. Since the barrier had broken, communication spells must be functional again. But blood had rushed to their heads earlier, their minds filled with nothing but destroying the vengeful spirits. No one else had thought to attempt communication through the array.

Xie Lian took a step forward. “My Lord, it’s White No-Face. He’s returned.”

Jun Wu nodded faintly. “I assumed he would be relentless.”

“He’s very elusive,” Xie Lian said. “Now that you’ve come, we don’t know where he’s hidden himself.”

“No matter,” Jun Wu replied. “Let us settle the vengeful spirits before we seek him out.”

Everyone looked to the sky. The rolling black clouds were being purified by the powerful light Jun Wu had brought forth.

“So you’ve stopped the birth of a new ghost king, right?” Pei Ming said.

“I guess so,” Xie Lian said. “After all, nothing broke through the Kiln besides this.”

Everyone’s eyes moved to look in unison. The giant divine statue was still lying obediently on the ground where it was left when Xie Lian stopped controlling it. Now that it’d fallen down, the gigantic, exquisitely sculpted thing looked like a small mountain in its own right.

Xie Lian stood near it and raised a hand to pet its cheek, then turned to Hua Cheng. “San Lang, what should we do with it?”

Hua Cheng seemed deep in thought, but he snapped out of it when he heard the question.

“There’s no need for gege to worry,” he replied. “Let’s leave it here until I can repair it.”

“Can it be fixed?” Xie Lian asked.

“Of course, as long as the Kiln can be sourced for stone,” Hua Cheng replied. “I’ll mend it and make it stand once again.”

“Then let’s leave it for now,” Xie Lian said. “The volcano is still erupting, and who knows when it’ll be safe again.”

Just then, the vengeful spirits in the air shrieked as one—they were swirling like a tornado, which then flew off into the distance. They couldn’t tell what had triggered this change until they looked closer at where the spirits had gone—the underground holy temple of Wuyong.

The creatures would have been dispersed sooner or later with nowhere to hide from the powerful rays, but so many vengeful spirits had poured into the underground temple it was like the sky had been sucked clean. The spirits had vanished completely.

Mu Qing was dumbfounded. “What happened?”

“It’s White No-Face!” Xie Lian cried, his dread growing. “He drew a Teleportation Array and sent the vengeful spirits somewhere!”

With a sweep of his hand, Jun Wu threw off the temple’s roof; a large chunk of ground was peeled away as well. There was nothing inside except an enormous, freshly drawn array.

“What is he planning?” Feng Xin exclaimed. “Where’s the array connected to? Where did he send them?!”

In the past, this would be where Ling Wen entered the picture—in less than half an incense time, the Palace of Ling Wen would have reported the location of every connecting point. But no one knew which civil gods had temporarily taken over the position, and not a single one of them could be found at this critical time.

“Fuck,” Feng Xin cursed in outrage. “They usually hype themselves up to the rest of the heavens, fighting for a chance to show off. Well, now’s their opportunity, but where the hell are they?! I’ll never say the Palace of Ling Wen is inefficient ever again!”

“The royal capital,” Hua Cheng said suddenly.

Everyone turned to him just as he let two long, slender fingers drop from his temple.

“He sent those creatures to several different cities. Only the royal capital is a confirmed target thus far—the evil qi in that area spiked suddenly.”

So…the civil gods of the Upper Court were useless, and these heavenly officials had to rely on the head honcho of the Ghost Realm to locate the escaped evil beings. Many of them couldn’t help but feel ashamed. But the situation was dire enough that their shame dispersed pretty quickly.

“We know exactly what the White-Clothed Calamity is planning: he’s purposely sending those creatures to the most heavily populated places,” Mu Qing said. “The royal capital is the most populated of all, so an outbreak of Human Face Disease would spread quickly; he obviously wouldn’t pass it up.”

“Let’s take care of this quickly,” Pei Ming cut in. “There’s no time to waste. Things will get ugly if we delay for too long.”

The gods serving as temporary substitutes in the Palace of Ling Wen were also a headache for Jun Wu, who had been rendered speechless. He turned to Hua Cheng. “Has our good sir determined where else they were sent?”

"I'm searching now; it won't take long. Yin Yu, you take over," Hua Cheng commanded.

"Yes, sir," Yin Yu quickly acknowledged.

Jun Wu was the one who banished him all those years ago. Although he had only been doing his duty, Yin Yu still couldn't help but feel nervous in his presence. After taking a moment to contact his subordinates in Ghost City, Yin Yu meticulously reported the general directions of each sighting.

"South 150 kilometers, north 135 kilometers…"

Jun Wu turned to Feng Xin. "Nan Yang, you search south."

Feng Xin hesitated for a moment, not immediately heeding the order. Xie Lian assumed it was because he wanted to search for Jian Lan and Cuocuo; he was just about to speak up when Feng Xin confirmed the order and walked away to draw an array for himself.

"I'll take the north?" Pei Ming spoke up knowingly.

"Naturally," Jun Wu replied.

Pei Ming nodded, then turned and walked away. Pei Xiu quickly followed, but Pei Ming turned to look at him.

"You're still injured, and the poison hasn't been cleared out of your system. Stay with Lord Rain Master for now."

Pei Xiu was puzzled. "General, I'm not, poi, soned?"

Pei Ming patted his shoulder sympathetically. "Your broken speech hasn't even healed, and you say you're not poisoned?"

Before he left on his own, he gave a curt nod to the Rain Master, who returned the courtesy.

“Qi Ying, why don’t you go to the western territories?” Jun Wu continued. “Remember not to cause—”

“Why am I going west?” Quan Yizhen asked, confused. “What exactly are we doing right now?”

“…”

It was somewhat understandable that he hadn’t kept up with what was happening, but he’d probably been totally confused this entire time. Why did he get beaten up? Why was he buried inside a wall? Why did he get turned into a budaoweng doll? And why did they want him to turn into a sword now? At no point during all of this had he figured out what was going on.

Seeing this, Yin Yu sighed. “I’ll take him. I’ll explain on the way.”

There was probably no one else with the patience to tell him anyway.

“Okay!” Quan Yizhen said enthusiastically.

Although he waited and waited, Mu Qing’s turn never came, and he couldn’t help but ask, “My Lord, what about me?”

Jun Wu looked him over. “Xuan Zhen, have you forgotten something?”

“What?” he asked in confusion.

“You are currently under detention,” Jun Wu said.

“…”

Mu Qing’s face quickly fell. He really had forgotten about that. And not just him; almost everyone had forgotten that he had escaped the Upper Court. He was suspected of creating the fetus spirit using wicked spells, and that suspicion hadn’t yet been cleared.

"You do not have to get involved. Return to the Upper Court. Your confinement will be reinstated."

"My Lord…it really wasn't me!" Mu Qing cried.

"Once we get to the bottom of this affair and the truth is revealed, you will naturally be released," Jun Wu said. "It would be a blatant disregard of protocol if I did so now without reason."

Although Mu Qing clearly couldn't stand it, there was nothing he could do except quietly acknowledge the order. "Yes, sir."

Seeing Mu Qing so thoroughly beaten down and dispirited made Hua Cheng laugh unabashedly. Mu Qing shot him a look, then glanced at Xie Lian beside him. Although Xie Lian had no idea what he was thinking, his face was growing darker by the minute.

As for the rest, the Rain Master was not a martial god, so she didn't try to act tough. She simply made it clear that they should call for her if there was any need for her assistance, then left silently. Xie Lian naturally chose the royal capital, which was the most populous and the most difficult to deal with. As for Jun Wu, he would stay behind and face the three mountain spirits—and possibly White No-Face, who could still be lurking nearby. Hua Cheng tossed his dice to open the Teleportation Array, and he and Xie Lian left together.

***

It was already late night in the royal capital, and the streets were quiet. The houses were equally silent and had their windows and doors shut tight. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng emerged from one of the alleyways and started walking swiftly, searching for traces of nefarious creatures.

After a few steps, Xie Lian raised two fingers and pressed them against his temple, activating the communication array.

“My Lord?” he whispered.

“What is it, Xianle?” Jun Wu answered. “Have you reached the royal capital?”

“We’ve arrived. I want to discuss something with you,” Xie Lian said.

“Did Crimson Rain Sought Flower do something to you?” Jun Wu asked.

“…”

Hua Cheng seemed to sense something and cocked an eyebrow at Xie Lian.

“…No, he hasn’t done anything to me. It’s something else; the situation earlier was too urgent, and I didn’t have a chance to speak.” Xie Lian’s tone turned serious. “My Lord, do you still remember my master?”

At the mention of that particular individual, Jun Wu seemed slightly taken aback. A moment later, he replied, “Do you mean the State Preceptor of Xianle?”

“Yes,” Xie Lian said. “You must have had a lot of contact with him in the past. Did you ever notice anything odd about him?”

All ceremonies and services in the Kingdom of Xianle were conducted by the state preceptor; he was the bridge that connected mortals to the gods.

After a moment of silence, Jun Wu replied, “Yes.”

Xie Lian held his breath. “…How was he odd?”

“Xianle, are you certain you want to hear this?” Jun Wu asked.

“Yes.”

“Even if it disappoints you?”

Xie Lian glanced at Hua Cheng. “Yes.”

It was a good while before Jun Wu slowly began to speak.

“That master of yours… Serving as the State Preceptor of Xianle was a gross underuse of his talents. His knowledge and skills are far beyond your imagination.”

Xie Lian listened quietly. The next words made his heart sink.

“I believe that the state preceptor and I have spent, at minimum, an equal number of years in this world. He has, perhaps, spent far more,” Jun Wu continued.

“…”

A part of Xie Lian’s conjecture had been verified. If the state preceptor had truly been alive for longer than Jun Wu, then it was even more likely that he was one of the Four Guardians of the Crown Prince of Wuyong!

“Why did you never tell me this before?” Xie Lian couldn’t help but ask.

“Because for a long time, I could not be sure,” Jun Wu said.

“Then how did you confirm it?”

"After Xianle fell, I found him and neutralized him. But it seems he still escaped in the end."

"…"

It was a staggering idea that someone other than White No-Face could escape Jun Wu's grasp. Xie Lian had always assumed that the state preceptor had fled during the chaos of the war—he could've never imagined it was because Jun Wu had personally set out to finish him!

"Then… Then why did you need to neutralize him?" Xie Lian asked. "And why didn't you tell me once you knew?"

"Your two questions are actually the same," Jun Wu said.

"What?"

"I mentioned that you may be disappointed when you hear this," Jun Wu said, "but perhaps you can now endure the feeling of being disappointed *in another person*."

Xie Lian's heart pounded faster and faster, and he unconsciously clutched one of Hua Cheng's hands tight. Hua Cheng's other hand rose to cover the back of his own.

"It was because I discovered," Jun Wu said, "that he wanted to awaken something within you."

Chapter 108:
Search for Five Hundred, Abrupt Meeting with an Old Friend

"AND WHAT WAS IT?" Xie Lian asked.

Jun Wu seemed to have reservations about the subject, and he deliberated for a long time before he spoke.

"What is the matter, Xianle? Why did you suddenly bring up your master? Was it something you encountered inside Mount Tonglu? Something that relates to him?"

Xie Lian came to his senses and was about to give a quick account before pressing with more questions, but a riot of noise erupted on the other end.

"I see the three mountain spirits you spoke of earlier. Indeed, they are peculiar!" Jun Wu said. "I will take care of them first, and we can talk again later. However, since Xianle has made the inquiry, remember this one thing: your master is no ordinary character. If you do encounter him, be extremely careful!"

Then the other end fell into abrupt silence.

"My Lord?" Xie Lian called out.

But Jun Wu did not respond. One of those mountain spirits alone would be hard enough to deal with; three surrounding and besieging him must be even more difficult. Even when Xie Lian had limitless spiritual power and controlled a phenomenal giant divine statue, he couldn't defeat them. Jun Wu was facing them alone, so he probably needed to focus and exert a considerable amount of strength. Xie Lian gave Hua Cheng a brief account of the conversation, and the two came to a stop.

They found themselves on a large street. When they gazed at the sky, gloomy clouds obscured the moon; vague wisps of something resembling black smoke could be seen drifting in front of its cold whiteness like ink blurring in clear water.

Those were the vengeful spirits sent from the holy temple of Wuyong, but they had yet to enter the royal capital itself. A majestic spiritual field had been woven from intertwining sources of gleaming spiritual light, such as the aura of the king in the palace and the many temples of various gods within the city. A natural barrier such as this would bar those throngs of wicked beings from entry, forcing them to wander high in the sky.

Almost every city possessed a similar shield because outstanding characters and impressive heavenly officials could appear anywhere; rich land fosters talent, as they say. However, those spiritual fields couldn't hold up forever.

"It'll be fine as long as we reinforce the barrier," Hua Cheng said.

But the problem was *how*.

"Talisman spells? Spiritual devices?" Xie Lian mused. Then he said, "Probably not."

The vengeful spirits covered the entire sky above the royal capital. It would take millions of talismans and spiritual devices, otherwise such defenses likely wouldn't hold. Pacing back and forth, Xie Lian gritted his teeth.

"San Lang, I have an idea. It might help reinforce the barrier, but…I need people."

"How many?" Hua Cheng asked.

"A lot," Xie Lian said. "As many as possible. At least five hundred."

"Alive or dead?" Hua Cheng asked. That wasn't a joke—he was listening seriously to Xie Lian's words.

"Alive. Ghosts won't do," Xie Lian replied. "I need to borrow the vigor and yang energy of the living to drive the vengeful spirits away."

"Then they'll need to be willing volunteers," Hua Cheng commented.

"Yes, they have to be willing," Xie Lian said. "And they must have the will to fight and protect. If they have fear in their hearts or their wills are weak, the spirits can take advantage of that and sneak through."

Hua Cheng nodded. "They must be people with the greatest desire to win, the ones with the most faith—just like soldiers fighting on the front lines of a war. Anyone forced into it or wishing to run away will end up abandoning our work here, and we'll suffer utter defeat."

"That's it exactly," Xie Lian said. "Can San Lang find people like that?"

After some contemplation, Hua Cheng replied slowly.

"Gege, if you needed the dead, I could bring you as many as you wanted. Involuntary living beings would be simple too. But it won't be easy to find volunteers." There was a pause, and then he continued, "There are many in the Mortal Realm who worship me as the Ghost King, but most of them obey out of terror—that, or they want something from me. I could force them or tempt them with material gains, but such methods probably won't work for finding the people gege needs. I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize," Xie Lian replied, enthralled by his words. "Let's just think of a way together."

"Mmm. However, gege, there's good news," Hua Cheng said. "There's a band of living humans about fifty paces ahead of us, just around the corner."

Xie Lian had sensed them too, and he rushed forward to see just as that very group of people also turned the corner. They shouted in surprise at his sudden appearance.

"A *ghost*!"

After a closer look, Xie Lian recognized who they were and exclaimed in delight, "Everyone, it's not a ghost, it's me!"

This group of monks and cultivators was very familiar indeed. The leader was a cultivator dressed in extravagant robes—wasn't that Heaven's Eye? And wasn't that large group behind him the band of monks and cultivators who had harassed them relentlessly? The ones who'd been knocked out when that shady inn's roof caved in?

Hua Cheng languidly approached with his hands clasped behind his back and came to stand behind Xie Lian. He certainly wasn't in the form of a child right now. Looking nonchalant, he flashed an ominous smile. The sight terrified Heaven's Eye and the others so deeply that they instantly jumped a meter backward.

"And you say there's no ghost! Is that not one?! A ghost *king*, even!"

Withdrawing his fake smile, Hua Cheng clicked his tongue in annoyance, too lazy to even make a proper comment. Since Xie Lian was urgently searching for living souls, he hastily raised his hand.

“Everyone, you’ve come right in the nick of time. There’s something —”

Yet the moment he raised his hand, their reaction was far more extreme than expected. On high alert, they all hurled themselves to the ground, exclaiming to each other, “Watch out for hidden weapons!”

“…”

Speechless, Xie Lian had to think for a while before he remembered which “hidden weapon” they were referring to. “Um… You don’t need to be afraid. I don’t have any hidden weapons on me.”

Incorruptible Chastity Meatballs weren’t so easily forged anyway. The knife work alone would take up most of the day.

“Besides, you forced my hand last time, and I didn’t do much of anything to you,” Xie Lian added. “And now, there’s even less reason for me to do anything.”

The mob contemplated his words and found them reasonable. They quickly got off the ground and dusted themselves off, but they still kept their distance, staffs and swords and other such spiritual tools in hand.

“I say, Daozhang,” Heaven’s Eye said. “We haven’t seen you for days, but the ghost qi on you has gotten worse. I think it’s best you turn back now while there’s still a chance. And speaking of, why is it so bad? I’m not trying to scare you, but I can barely see your face anymore.”

“…”

Xie Lian was practically blushing, and he didn’t dare look at Hua Cheng as he cut Heaven’s Eye off. “Let’s discuss that later. Everyone, I was observing signs in the night sky and saw some ominous creatures. Have you seen them as well?”

“Obviously!” Heaven’s Eye said. “Observing signs in the skies is part of our daily duties. And here I thought it was those nefarious things causing trouble, but could it be—is it the work of Hua Cheng…zhu?”

“Of course not,” Xie Lian said. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here letting you know. We’ve also come here because of those creatures, and we were just thinking of ways to reinforce the royal capital’s aura field.”

Heaven’s Eye was doubtful. “You two? Thinking of ways to help? But…why would the Ghost King be so kindhearted?”

Hua Cheng grinned. “It’s not out of kindness, per se. If I wanted to do something to the royal capital, that pathetic shield couldn’t possibly stop me.”

The expressions of the cultivators and monks were unreadable. Xie Lian knew that they couldn’t so easily drop their guard, so he didn’t try to force them.

“I’ve faced those creatures in the sky before, and they’re very difficult to deal with. If we let them break through the protective shield of the royal capital, everything will be thrown into chaos. I’m seeking help right now to form an array. I need about five hundred people.”

Heaven’s Eye gaped. “Five hundred?! What kind of array is it, to need so many people?! I’ve never heard of anything like that before!”

Xie Lian didn’t have the heart to tell him that five hundred was the bare minimum requirement. In fact, to be blunt, they really needed at least eight hundred.

The other monks and cultivators joined in with further commentary.

“I’ve never heard of an array like that either. Has anyone seen records of one in any books?”

“Can they really get that powerful?”

“I’ve heard of yao that eat five hundred in one bite, but I’ve never heard of an array that needed that many.”

“Is it dangerous?”

After much serious deliberation, Xie Lian answered honestly. “I can’t say for sure. Maybe, maybe not. I’m only mostly certain, since I’ve never attempted it before.”

It would be impossible to find records of this array, since Xie Lian hadn’t learned it from books or anyone else—it was something he’d come up with over the past eight hundred years as he wandered and ruminated about what should be done if Human Face Disease was unleashed again. They couldn’t possibly just sit around and do nothing, after all. Although he did come up with a solution, he hadn’t expected to face such an enormous crisis again—he didn’t imagine his method would see any use.

The group huddled for a while, and in the end, Heaven’s Eye turned around.

“We don’t have that many people. Plus…” he trailed off, clearly on guard.

Plus, they didn’t trust Xie Lian and Hua Cheng.

Nothing could be done. After all, they didn’t know what Human Face Disease was or how devastating it would be. Not to mention, they had extensive grievances against Hua Cheng—there must’ve been plenty of incidents where he toyed with them as if they were no more than insects. Xie Lian had initially thought that, since these people were masters of their faith, they would each have their own schools and disciples—so perhaps they could drag a few out here from wherever until they'd gathered up three or four hundred, and he could worry about making up the remaining number later. But it seemed this hope was fruitless.

“Gege, stop wasting your breath on them,” Hua Cheng said. “Let's go.”

Xie Lian nodded, not the least bit discouraged, and left with him. However, Heaven's Eye and the others didn't leave—instead, they sneakily followed them, apparently thinking they were well hidden. Xie Lian was rendered quite speechless, but then he considered the fact that this group of masters was probably only trailing them because they were worried that he and Hua Cheng would cause trouble in the capital. Their worries were born of kind hearts. Xie Lian found it funny and stopped caring.

“Why not try the slums?” Hua Cheng suggested. “There's no lack of desperate and daring souls in a place like that. Maybe we'll find success there.”

The two changed course and proceeded into the shadows of the royal capital. There, they found a nearly demolished temple. They observed the area; there were sleeping people scattered everywhere on the ground, from the inside of the temple stretching all the way to the outskirts. They seemed to be a band of homeless folks, or rather, beggars. The air was frigid and the ground cold, but almost all of them were dressed in nothing but rags. There were men, women, seniors, and children, and none of them were shy of their improper proximity. Some were lying on tattered mats, some were hugging bundles of straw for warmth, and some just slept on the ground. The ones who were awake were sighing and wailing over the rotten sores on their bodies or picking fleas off of themselves. There was even someone shuffling about, dragging a bad leg, who seemed to be delivering bowls of water to the sick. The suffocating smell of sweat and other strange odors came wafting out before they even entered.

The most prosperous part of the city was so close to the filthiest, most decrepit slums; they were but a street apart. The contrast was truly lamentable.

Of course, Xie Lian had no time to lament. He crossed over the threshold and called out, “Can anyone give me a hand?”

Curses came before any proper answers. “Fuck that! Someone should give *me* a hand! Ya gonna let us sleep or what?! Get the hell outta here!”

Not at all offended, Xie Lian continued to speak. “It’s something very urgent. If everyone is willing to help out, then you’ll certainly…it’ll certainly be for the greater good!”

Initially, he had wanted to say they’d “have our utmost *thanks*.” They would be thanked, no doubt, but their minds would not be pure if they came for rewards.

The cussing grew harsher now. “What the hell do I care about the greater good?!”

“Is there pay?” someone asked.

Xie Lian looked back. Hua Cheng’s eye flashed with displeasure; he seemed ready to take a more aggressive approach. Xie Lian quickly pulled him back.

“Not yet,” he said in a hushed voice. “You said it yourself, San Lang—we can’t use force or temptation. Give me some time, and I’ll persuade them. There must be some folks we can use in this group of seventy or eighty.”

Only then did the dangerous glint in Hua Cheng's eye fade.

Suddenly, a slightly raspy voice called out.

"Hey, hey, hey! Everyone, hear me out, everyone! Hear me out! Stop arguing! Let's hear what he's got to say first!"

Xie Lian looked back to see who had spoken. It was the beggar with the bad leg. It was difficult to see what he looked like, for his looks were obscured by his tattered appearance—he was unkempt and very thin, almost frail. However, his voice sounded fairly young. He waved to hail the crowd, but strangely, he did it with only one arm, his posture awkward. The other beggars all seemed to listen to him, so the noise of cussing and yelling faded.

"Thank you!" Xie Lian called out, not wasting any time. He flipped his hand over and lit a palm torch, the flames blowing high.

The crowd of beggars howled in fright, and the ones not yet awake were woken by the ruckus.

"What's that wicked magic?!"

Xie Lian set his expression. "It's not wicked magic, it's spiritual magic. This proves that my words are true. It's like this: right now, a horde of evil creatures has surrounded the royal capital and is about to attack. We need five hundred volunteers to join a spiritual array that will protect the royal capital. Who is willing? I won't lie, there might be danger. I won't force anyone—I only ask for the willing!"

"…"

A blanket of silence descended upon the broken temple. The beggars looked at each other, but no one would step forward to volunteer.

A moment later, one spoke up.

“Protect the royal capital? Forget it.”

Xie Lian looked over. A slumped man was mumbling to himself, “The royal capital doesn’t protect me, but they’d have me protect them? Ha. Do whatever you want—it’s none of my damn business!”

The man’s indifferent tone was laced with indignation. It wasn’t that Xie Lian couldn’t understand, but this wasn’t helping right now. This temple was clearly crowded with the poor and suffering, people who shared circumstances and opinions with that man. Their lives in the royal capital weren’t pleasant, and there was no reward offered, so who among them would want to help? It was already midwinter and deathly cold even huddled together inside the temple grounds. Who would want to go outside?

Xie Lian gave it one last shot. “If those creatures invade the royal capital, a terrifying plague will break out. Everyone will be affected.”

“What plague could be more terrifying than all these sores on my body?” said an elderly beggar lying on the ground.

“If there really is a plague on the way, why not just leave the city, eh? We don’t gotta stay here—it’s not that great a place anyway. Everywhere’s the same.”

“Get those mighty, noble old masters and mistresses of the royal capital to help. Someone else will do it. Why does it have to be us?”

“Well…” Xie Lian trailed off.

He couldn’t tell them straight out that those mighty, distinguished old masters and mistresses would also say the same thing: “Someone else will surely go even if I don’t.” Besides, there would be things they couldn’t bear to abandon when faced with danger; since they had assets and roots here in the royal capital, the urge to shirk their responsibility would be even stronger. It wasn’t that such a mentality was wrong or bad—it was just that nothing could be accomplished if everyone thought like that.

He waited for a while, but no one stepped forward.

“All right. Sorry for disturbing you,” Xie Lian said resolutely, then turned around and left the broken temple.

“Don’t worry, gege, I’ve got people on the move,” Hua Cheng comforted him. “News has been spread; we should be able to find enough.”

Xie Lian nodded. He wasn’t worried they couldn’t find five hundred, but that they wouldn’t be found fast enough. Grabbing people at random to make up the numbers would be counterproductive. He glanced at the sky, which was still obscured by those elusive wisps within the black clouds.

A voice suddenly rang out from behind him. “Wait! Wait, wait, wait! I’ll go!”

Stunned, Xie Lian whipped his head around. The beggar with the bad leg shuffled over and hopped out the temple door.

“The people you seek—it’s fine as long as they’re alive, right? Broken limbs aren’t an issue?”

As it turned out, the man’s movements looked awkward not just because of the injured leg but because one of his arms was broken and hung limply at his side.

Finally having a volunteer warmed Xie Lian’s heart. “Not a problem at all!” he replied.

“Then we’re good!” the man replied, equally straightforward. “Take me along!”

The crowd of beggars inside the temple were shocked.

“What are you doing?! Didn’t you hear him?! It could be dangerous!”

“Yeah! And there’s no pay either! Those guys went on and on, but there wasn’t a single mention of kickbacks!”

“Don’t dive into that muddy water! Come back, Ol’ Feng!”

“…”

Since they first arrived at the temple, Xie Lian had thought that this man looked extremely familiar somehow. But he hadn’t recognized him—his appearance was too different from the one in his memories, and his slightly raspy voice wasn’t quite the same. But now that he heard the people call out the word “Feng,” for “wind,” it dawned on him.

Still, even staring right at him, it was hard to believe.

“…Lord Wind Master?!”

The beggar laughed out loud, reaching up to swipe away the black hair covering his face. “You’ve caught me, Your Highness!”

Underneath that filthy black hair was a pair of bright eyes, as brilliant as they had ever been. Xie Lian was rendered speechless in shock.

Shi Qingxuan scratched his head. “Gosh, ha ha ha ha ha. I wanted to disguise myself and observe you guys secretly for a bit, but I didn’t think Your Highness’s eyes were so sharp! It can’t be helped—must be because my grace is unforgettable! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha…”

Xie Lian put his hands on Shi Qingxuan’s shoulders and choked out, “…Lord Wind Master.”

Shi Qingxuan stopped laughing, but he still scratched at his head as if his hair was swarming with itchy fleas. “Your Highness, I’m not the Wind Master anymore.”

“Very well. Qingxuan,” Xie Lian said. There was a pause before he asked, “How…did this happen to you?”

“Uh, just… It’s a long story,” Shi Qingxuan said. “It was this and that, here and there, and then I ended up like this.”

The crowd inside the temple called out, “What? Ol’ Feng, you know these two?!”

Shi Qingxuan turned around, winding his arm around Xie Lian’s shoulders before slapping him hard on the back. “Yeah! They’re my good friends from the past!”

“What?! They’re your friends?! Ol’ Feng, why didn’t you say so?!”

“Ol’ Feng, someone like you actually knows a fine little tender-skinned pretty boy who was obviously raised in sweetness? I bet you’re bullshittin’ again!”

It should’ve been funny listening to the crowd making such a big deal out of nothing, but Xie Lian could only feel upset. It had to be stated that, among the three of them, the Wind Master was the only true fine little tender-skinned pretty boy raised in sweetness.

Shi Qingxuan was furious. “What’s that you say? I’m not bullshittin’!”

“Please! Remember back when you were still nuts and talked nonsense all day? Think we’ve all forgotten?!”

“La-la-la!” Shi Qingxuan made a series of unintelligible noises. “I’m going to go help my friends now—I’m leaving, I’m leaving! Anyone else comin’?”

This time, the people in the crowd exchanged looks. A moment later, a few spoke up.

“All right, fine. It’s different if it’s Ol’ Feng’s friend.”

“Let’s go along with Ol’ Feng—in case somebody beats him to death. He’s already down an arm and a leg.”

“Hey!” Shi Qingxuan cried.

Still, some wouldn’t relent and pushed further.

“Is there really no reward? Even if there’s no money, a chicken leg to eat would be fine too.”

Xie Lian gave Shi Qingxuan a brief, simple account so both parties understood the situation.

Shi Qingxuan gave it some thought. “I understand that we can’t use force or temptation, but giving everyone a bite to eat should be fine, right? Nobody here has had a good meal in a long time.”

As long as there was no lust for profit, it wouldn’t be a problem.

“It should be all right,” Xie Lian replied. “But say it like this…”

He whispered a few words.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Shi Qingxuan confirmed.

Then he turned around and hollered to the crowd, “Hey! After this is done, they’re gonna treat everyone to chicken legs and soup! Everyone gets a bowl whether they help or not! Attention! You’ll get one even if you don’t go! We’re only asking for volunteers!”

The way he'd phrased it was crafty indeed: "Everyone gets a bowl…" Everyone would get to eat whether they helped or not, which made the ones who decided to help out immensely valuable.

"Anyone else coming? The more the merrier!" Shi Qingxuan shouted. "Come, come, come! Tell everyone there's no money involved, okay? It's just giving me a hand, saving the world, and protecting the royal capital while we're at it or whatever. But we only want volunteers! We'll treat everyone to a good meal after this is done!"

Perhaps it was because there was someone leading the charge, but the cold and indifferent temple became as hot as fire in the blink of an eye. Some beggars even set out to inform more homeless folks they knew.

Xie Lian, Hua Cheng, and Shi Qingxuan stood at the entrance of the rundown temple. As Xie Lian looked up at the empty spot where the establishment plaque should have been, he couldn't help but remember the dilapidated Temple of Wind and Water in the town of Fu Gu and the divine statues that they had found there—the headless statue of the Water Master and the statue of the Wind Master that was missing an arm and a leg.

In the end, he couldn't hold back. He turned to Shi Qingxuan, asking with great hesitation, "…Qingxuan?"

Shi Qingxuan dropped his arm from Xie Lian's shoulder. "What is it? Oh, sorry about your clothes, Your Highness. My hand's a little dirty, ha ha."

Sure enough, his arm had left dirty marks on the shoulder of Xie Lian's white robes. He looked as if he wanted to help Xie Lian dust himself off but realized that his dusting would only make it dirtier. He withdrew his hand, rubbing his nose awkwardly.

As if Xie Lian cared about such trifles. He was only concerned with one thing. “Lord… Qingxuan, your fate…”

Shi Qingxuan stopped. “What about my fate?”

“Did…Black Water change it after all…?” Xie Lian asked.

Realization finally dawned on Shi Qingxuan, and he quickly said, “Oh no, no, no. He didn’t, he didn’t. You’ve misunderstood. He didn’t do anything.”

Indeed, Xie Lian hadn’t thought Black Water would actually change Shi Qingxuan’s fate in the end. “Then your arm and leg…?”

Shi Qingxuan scratched at his head again and said, a little embarrassed, “This wasn’t him either. How do I explain… There was some carelessness here and some really bad luck there, but this was all my own doing.”

Since he wouldn’t share the details, Xie Lian didn’t press. Except somehow, by some mysterious force, Shi Qingxuan’s present state had somehow turned He Xuan’s old act of anger at Fu Gu’s Temple of Wind and Water into a prophecy.

“That day, my spiritual powers were abruptly drained away, and I couldn’t help you. I’m really sorry,” Xie Lian said.

Shi Qingxuan waved dismissively. “The whole thing had nothing to do with you anyway. If Your Highness hadn’t told me what was going on beforehand, I might have stayed confused to the very end.”

“What exactly happened afterward, that day?” Xie Lian asked.

After He Xuan decapitated Shi Wudu, Shi Qingxuan had gone limp and lifeless. He couldn’t process anything He Xuan said to him—he could only vaguely recall that He Xuan had taken him away from Black Water Island and later ditched him in the royal capital. Shi Qingxuan didn’t understand why he picked the royal capital specifically, but before all this, he had always fussed about wanting to go there to feast and drink, so he was fairly familiar with the area. Everything was a blur; when he finally snapped out of it, he decided to simply bury his name and settle down here.

Since he had completely lost his spiritual powers, had nothing with which he could prove his identity, and spent his days in blight and squalor, it was only natural that the Upper Court couldn’t find any trace of him.

“In any case, it has nothing to do with him,” Shi Qingxuan said. “And I haven’t seen him since.”

It would probably be for the best that they never saw each other again. This affair was truly difficult to manage—should He Xuan really be killed? The Water Master had savagely taunted He Xuan in the moments before his death, and Xie Lian had been seriously worried for Shi Qingxuan’s fate.

Just then, the band of beggars returned with more people. The mob pushed and dragged the newcomers, shouting as they came. “Ol’ Feng, Ol’ Feng! We’ve found all these people for ya—what do you think?”

Shi Qingxuan gave them a big thumbs-up. “Good work! Everyone gets a chicken leg!”

“There’s so many people—can they afford to feed all of us?”

Shi Qingxuan swept his hand, and for a moment, Xie Lian almost thought he was going to toss out a hundred thousand merits. But he only said, “This is nothing! Never mind this many; they can afford to feed ten times this number!”

Finally snapping out of it enough to take a rough headcount, Xie Lian found that there were more than two hundred people gathered—completely beyond Xie Lian's expectations! Delighted, he said, "Lord Wind M—Qingxuan, this is a great help!"

Shi Qingxuan looked immensely proud. "But of course. I can call forth hundreds of folk no matter where I go. Maybe in the future I should start a gang or something, fish up a gang leader title, ha ha ha ha ha ha ha…"

"Ol' Feng's gone nuts again," the crowd of beggars behind them commented.

"Yeah, right! He's braggin' again!"

"What?! I'm not bragging!" Shi Qingxuan exclaimed.

But the beggars couldn't resist giving him a hard time.

"My friend, did you know?" one said to Xie Lian. "When Ol' Feng first came here, he was a mess. Babbling like a madman, chasing people around all day and boasting that he was a god."

Shi Qingxuan immediately scoffed but looked a little uneasy. "I don't have time to listen to you talk nonsense—leave your mouths free for eating chicken legs!"

Xie Lian listened to them quietly, his smile fading a bit. His heart felt like it was crumpled into a ball, but at the same time, like it was laid out and nicely flattened like rice paper.

Lord Wind Master had changed, but he also hadn't.

Thank goodness.

“Your Highness, what do we do now?” Shi Qingxuan asked. “I got the people for you; they’re in your hands now.”

They still didn’t have the numbers they needed, but they’d deal with that later. They would figure it out after the array was set up.

“Very good. Now we need to find an empty space that can hold this many people,” Xie Lian replied.

The whole time, Hua Cheng hadn’t interrupted their conversation once, and Xie Lian couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Only now did he speak up.

“That’s easy to take care of. Gege, come with me.”

Xie Lian nodded, and Shi Qingxuan hobbled over as he hailed the crowd buoyantly. “Hey! Everyone, follow us! Don’t lose your way!”

On reflex, Xie Lian moved to assist him, but understood that his help wasn’t needed when he saw that he didn’t walk any slower than anyone else and no one else moved to support him. And so, the large, bustling group of beggars pushed out of the slum and poured into the streets.

But they didn’t get very far before there was an angry shout.

“Stop right there! What’s this? There’s so many of you—are you trying to start something in the middle of the night?!”

The cry startled the beggars, which then turned to great alarm.

“Oh no! It’s the night patrol!”

However, Hua Cheng didn’t look back, so Xie Lian didn’t bother either. “Don’t mind them.”

He’d only just spoken when the soldier slumped suddenly to the ground. The beggars started chattering in amazement.

“Quiet!” Shi Qingxuan cried. “Don’t attract more soldiers!”

The group hushed each other.

Hua Cheng paused in his step. “Gege, this street will do.”

“This one?” Xie Lian asked. “It’s certainly suitable, but won’t it be too conspicuous?”

The street in question was extremely large, straight, and spacious; its paved stones stretched far into the distance. But it was also the main avenue of the royal capital—of course it was extremely conspicuous!

Everyone chimed in, “Yeah, what if we get discovered and chased away?!”

“It’s fine,” Hua Cheng said. “They won’t be able to chase us away, even if they discover us.”

Xie Lian nodded. “Everyone, I must make this absolutely clear to you: we will be facing something very sinister, and it could be dangerous. However, if it breaks through our defense, the entire royal capital will be in danger. I need all of you to be certain you’re doing this voluntarily and that you don’t have any second thoughts. Is anyone scared and wanting to back out?”

No one.

“Very good,” Xie Lian stated. “Now, will everyone hold hands and form a large circle?”

“What kind of spell is this?” someone asked, puzzled. “Why does it sound like you’re asking a bunch of toddlers to line up?”

“Enough talk; just do it!” Shi Qingxuan snapped.

“Heh, you’ve got it wrong, Ol’ Feng. No one talks more than you, yanno!”

Amidst the chatter and bustle, the crowd followed the directions and the two-hundred-some people held hands, forming an extremely large human circle on the wide, spacious main avenue of the royal capital.

“Those creatures won’t be able to break into the royal capital as long as we hold hands like this?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

“No,” Xie Lian said. “They’ll get in sooner or later.”

Shi Qingxuan was confused. “Then what’s the use of this array of yours?”

“It’s a trap,” Xie Lian explained. “Once they break through the protective barrier of the royal capital, as long as we have this array set up, the creatures won’t run amok through the city. Instead, they’ll be lured to this circle—and then we’ll have them.”

Chapter 109:
Two Simple Lines, Ghost King Excites the Battle Spirit

"AND WHAT HAPPENS after we ambush them?" Shi Qingxuan asked.

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng had already positioned themselves at the center of the human array.

"After that, just leave it to us. We'll be here inside the array to take care of them, and we'll make sure we don't spare a single one. All we need is time. The most important thing is that we ensure they don't scatter. Before, I said there might be danger because we don't have a full five hundred people, so it's hard to say whether the circle will hold and prevent the creatures from breaking loose."

Someone swallowed hard and asked, "Wh-what will happen if they break out of the circle?"

"It won't be pretty," Xie Lian replied. "The vengeful spirits will possess you, and you'll be the first to catch the plague…"

"If… I'm just saying, *if* someone lets go and runs away, what would happen?"

"If the circle is broken, the vengeful spirits *might* possess the runner as well," Xie Lian said.

"So the spirits will possess them either way!"

The smarter folks understood and explained, "It's different. The former is a guarantee that the spirits will possess and infect you; the latter is a maybe. Meaning, there might still be a chance for survival if you were to let go and run away."

“That’s it exactly,” Xie Lian said. “So does anyone want to leave? You absolutely cannot back out once things begin, but it won’t matter who leaves before we start. I hope no one will say anything to those who decide to do so; this is a dangerous task, after all.”

It was something that had to be said—otherwise, they wouldn’t truly have a group made only of people brimming with courage and determination. Sure enough, the circle shrank a little a moment later as a few dozen backed out, leaving hurriedly one after the other with their heads bowed.

“Thank goodness.” Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief.

“How’s that *good*?!” Shi Qingxuan exclaimed. “We’ve got fewer people now.”

Xie Lian smiled. “There are plenty of people here; this is better than I had imagined.”

He had been solemnly deliberating what should be done if half their number left, but they’d only lost a few dozen; it was a welcome surprise.

A voice could suddenly be heard in the distance. “Hold it! Do you know who those people are? You can’t trust them so easily! Careful not to get yourselves murdered!”

Xie Lian looked back and saw that it was Heaven’s Eye and company.

“And who the heck are you people?” Shi Qingxuan groused. “Don’t add to the problem if you’re not planning to help. I promise none of them will harm a soul.”

Of course, the band of spiritual masters cared nothing for the words of a filthy, unkempt beggar. “And who the heck are *you*? How many pennies do your words cost?”

When Shi Qingxuan heard them insult him like that, his anger rolled up. He pointed at his own face. “*Hah?* You’re goin’ on about money in front of *me*? I don’t think you know who you’re talking to! I bet you’ve even prostrated before this…*cough cough*…”

He trailed off and then shrank back, coughing. The band of spiritual masters assumed that he couldn’t keep bluffing anymore and retreated of his own accord, so they stopped caring.

Instead, they urged the crowd, “None of you know what those two are planning! You risk losing your lives for a small bite to eat!”

Xie Lian was about to explain that the beggars were there to help for friendship and justice, not a free meal, but before he could, Hua Cheng spoke up languidly.

“That’s not true. They’re not here for food, they’re here to save the world.”

Xie Lian was a little puzzled. Why would Hua Cheng tell them that? However, the masters scoffed.

“What? Save the world? What kind of blind fuss are you trying to kick up? Just worry about yourselves!”

“Yeah, there’s no need for a bunch of beggars to get involved. Go away and stop adding to the trouble.”

“Oh? So you mean to say that beggars can’t save the world?” Hua Cheng retorted idly. “Is it because they don’t have the ability, or because they’re not worthy?”

The beggars immediately grew rowdy at this, extreme displeasure coloring their expressions.

“That’s not what we said!” Heaven’s Eye exclaimed angrily.

Shi Qingxuan poked his head out again and pointed at him. “Hey, hey, hey, I heard it myself! Isn’t that exactly what you meant? And you sounded so scornful too. Right, everyone?!”

“Yeah! What did you mean by that?! How are we not worthy?!”

“They’ll feed us whether we help or not! Do you really think we only came here for the food?! Stop looking down on us!”

Xie Lian turned to look at Hua Cheng, who arched his brows at him with a look that said, *“That was child’s play.”*

So that was why he said it, Xie Lian thought.

Although plenty of people had remained in the circle, they weren’t particularly determined. So when Heaven’s Eye and company had unintentionally shown their disdain—all but saying, “Filthy beggars like you are useless in such matters”—Hua Cheng seized upon it and magnified it to incite the beggars’ rebellious spirits. *“You think we’re useless? Now we’re dead set on proving that we’ve got what it takes too!”*

Their battle spirits surged. Both sides were yelling at each other, and Xie Lian addressed Heaven’s Eye and his entourage.

“If you’re really worried, you can stand by and watch. That way, you can easily stop us if we do anything bad.”

Next to him, Hua Cheng added, “But be sure you don’t get in the way, m’kay?”

“…”

This band of spiritual masters had trailed Xie Lian and Hua Cheng the entire time and finally mustered the courage to jump out and take action, but Hua Cheng's frightening fake smile quickly terrified them into submission.

Hua Cheng turned back to Xie Lian. "Gege, look at the sky."

Xie Lian looked up with him. The black shadows in front of the full moon were now more distinct as if they had quietly snuck closer. While Xie Lian spent time seeking help, the black night crept along, and now the creatures were on the verge of descending!

Oh no, Xie Lian thought, his heart lurching. *We're out of time to find more people!*

But he didn't allow this to show on his face as he urgently cried, "Everyone, get in position! Hold on tight!"

Shi Qingxuan was already standing at attention. "Your High— Ol' Xie, we don't have very many people. Won't the spirits break through quickly?" He'd avoided Xie Lian's title at the last second, since using it might've caused confusion—and unnecessary trouble. This was the Mortal Realm, after all.

"I will stand guard here and keep a constant watch, and I'll reinforce any spot on the array that risks being breached," Xie Lian replied. "That will buy us some time."

Basically, he would fix the leaks as they appeared.

"Uhh, w-well then, our lives are in your hands. Including mine, Your High…Ol' Xie," Shi Qingxuan replied. "You gotta work hard, all right? Work very hard! I'm a mortal right now!"

"All right, Ol' Feng, I'll give it my all."

Everyone’s palms were sweaty, and everyone’s faces were tense. Just after they all tightly clutched each other’s hands, shrieks rang out in the silent night sky. The noises came closer and closer, faster and faster!

They had come!

Seizing the right timing, Xie Lian instructed, “Everyone, blow air forward!”

The people didn’t understand, but they followed directions. They each filled their cheeks and started blowing with all their might. The large crowd puffed out a circle of hot, white mist in the middle of the winter’s night. Although their breaths didn’t travel far, the warm air mixed with yang energy would be confusing to any spirit who saw it. In addition, Hua Cheng had secretly cast a camouflage spell to stop the creatures from seeing what was happening down below.

The vengeful spirits had intended to scatter and run amok, but they sensed an area that was particularly heavy with heat and the energy of the living, rippling and undulating and incredibly lively. Naturally, they assumed it was their target and excitedly rushed over in a raging black pillar.

In an instant, Xie Lian’s field of vision was almost completely blocked. “Everyone, be careful not to loosen your hold! They’ve come into the cage!” he cried out.

At that same moment, thousands of silver butterflies emerged from behind Hua Cheng and spread out. Haunting silver light illuminated the area, and the black fog before Xie Lian’s eyes was dispersed. He saw Hua Cheng extend a hand toward him.

“Gege, come to my side.”

Xie Lian was slightly startled but still took his hand immediately. With a light tug, Hua Cheng easily pulled Xie Lian over to him and wrapped an arm around his waist as he swept the area with a composed glare. Even though the vengeful spirits had lost their minds during their two-thousand-year imprisonment inside the Kiln, they still didn’t dare to go near Hua Cheng—there was not even a hint of their dark aura within a three-meter radius of the pair.

It was only then that the vengeful spirits, who had so gleefully dropped into the circle, noticed something amiss. They had been tearing around and chomping down, but why hadn’t they torn into any living humans, instead mangling each other? There were also two beings they couldn’t even touch, and those silver butterflies were like sharp blades and showers of arrows; their flapping wings assaulted and slaughtered the vengeful spirits, sending their screams shooting to the skies!

The vengeful spirits finally realized they’d been trapped. They were like savage, imprisoned beasts locked in with fires raging all around, but the two-hundred-some people weren’t the audience outside their cage—they were the iron bars!

Beyond outraged, the vengeful spirits screeched violently and savagely at the beggars who were blocking their rampage with nothing but joined hands. They opened their mouths so wide that it looked like they were about to devour the beggars’ heads. Their hair bristled with fury, and their faces and bodies twisted into miserable contortions. Some of the beggars were frightened enough to back up a few steps, but they were quickly stopped by those next to them.

“Don’t move!”

“Don’t move!” Xie Lian echoed. “They can’t hurt you as long as the array is intact!”

That reassured the crowd a little. Some beggars even spat wildly at the shrieking vengeful spirits, jeering as they did.

“I’ll dirty you, dirty you! Get the hell outta here!”

They had probably heard from somewhere that ghosts were afraid of filthy things. Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“You don’t need to do that either! They’re not scared of that!”

Just then, he noticed a spot in the human array was about to fall apart, a weak point about to spring a leak. He hastily looked over and saw a scrawny little beggar whose bulging eyes were unfocused, his breathing harsh. He looked so scared that it seemed he was about to start convulsing.

Many of the vengeful spirits also noticed that the man’s spirit was weakening, and they swarmed toward him. Xie Lian rushed over and whipped with his silk band, and the vengeful spirits howled as they were struck apart. Xie Lian quickly made the man back out of the circle, ordering the people on his left and right to connect their hands instead.

Before he had the time to breathe in relief, another leak appeared about eighteen meters to the southwest. And just as Xie Lian was about to rush over, he discovered that another leak had sprung farther away—from the person right next to Shi Qingxuan!

There were countless vengeful spirits, after all, and this was only the first wave—the stream of spirits was practically endless.

He wouldn’t make it in time. Xie Lian cried, “San Lang!”

Hua Cheng didn’t move. “Gege, don’t worry.”

Xie Lian refused to believe Hua Cheng didn’t notice, and he refused to believe that Hua Cheng would ignore such a dire situation…but that hole was about to be exploited by the vengeful spirits!

Right at the critical moment, however, a yellow talisman came flying and exploded beside Shi Qingxuan!

Although the talisman didn’t hit any vengeful spirits, it did make them recoil in alarm. It had been thrown by someone from the band of spiritual masters who had been spying on them all this time.

“I told you lot not to get involved!” they yelled as they rushed over. “But since you did, stand your ground to the end! If you can’t, you’re just adding to the trouble!”

Hua Cheng turned to Xie Lian, forever at ease. “See, I told you not to worry.”

“Mmm!” Xie Lian answered.

In the end, Heaven’s Eye and the other masters couldn’t bear to stand by and watch and came charging over. They were indeed professional martial artists, and they moved quickly and agilely; they each grabbed two people to separate their hands and bridge themselves in. Dozens and dozens of newcomers assimilated into the circle, expanding the human array.

“Fellow colleagues! Quick, quick, quick—whoever has schools or disciples here in the capital, tell them to come quickly!” Heaven’s Eye called out.

“Go, go, go!”

“I’ll call my disciple over too!”

Soon another hundred-some people came barreling down the street, and they were all impressive—monks, cultivators, spellcasters! Each was fully geared up and took two steps as one; their heroic demeanor was refreshing to see. Xie Lian cheered loudly in his head while the beggars stared with wide eyes and dropped jaws. This new wave of people was stunned by the extraordinary sight before them—a raging pillar roiling with a peculiar aura—however, they joined in without hesitation. Once they assimilated, the circle expanded even more; the royal capital's main avenue was going to run out of room. And on top of the newcomers' bravery, they were also packing all sorts of spiritual devices that would no doubt greatly extend the time the array could hold.

Seeing this bolstered Xie Lian's confidence. He called out with calm assurance, "Everyone, don't be afraid! The tables are turning. We've got more and more people on our side. As long as we hold the line, we will destroy them! It's only a matter of time!"

The crowd could also see the situation was turning in their favor. Hope made everything easier. In an instant, everyone's confidence grew.

"Destroy them!" cried the crowd enthusiastically.

From his side of the circle, Heaven's Eye said, "We've got 168 people on our side! How many do you have? How long do you think we can last?"

The leader of the beggars, Shi Qingxuan, counted and re-counted before he answered loudly, "We've got 148 remaining in the array!"

"That's 316 altogether," Xie Lian said. "We just need to find—"

"That's not right," Hua Cheng interrupted.

Xie Lian turned to him. "What's not right?"

Hua Cheng’s solemn gaze returned to Xie Lian. “The count isn’t right. There are 317 people here.”

Chapter 110:
Seeking Affection, the Ghost King Fakes Displeasure

XIE LIAN WAS SILENT for a long moment.

Although Hua Cheng had only swept a glance over the crowd, Xie Lian wholeheartedly trusted that he hadn't counted wrong. He had spoken in a hushed voice, so no one could have overheard.

Xie Lian also swiftly scanned the circle. Everyone was holding hands, so when did an extra person join? Could Shi Qingxuan have counted wrong?

"Are you sure you've got the right number? You didn't miss anyone?" Xie Lian asked him.

"Nope! Didn't you say headcount is important? I've been keeping count all this time, even deducted the ones who left halfway through. There's exactly 148 of us," Shi Qingxuan confidently confirmed. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

It wouldn't be good to explain right then; doing so recklessly would only start an unnecessary panic. Xie Lian couldn't have people point out anyone they didn't recognize either, as there were too many people present and most didn't know each other in the first place.

Thus, Xie Lian replied, "No, I'm just verifying."

It was even less likely that the spiritual masters miscounted—everyone had reported the headcount of their own group to Heaven's Eye, and he added them all together. There was no way they didn't know exactly how many had come from their schools.

“When did an extra person join us? What are they planning?” Xie Lian whispered.

“They either snuck in at the start or mixed in when the spiritual masters joined. But they are human for certain.”

At least it definitely wasn’t a ghost. Everyone in the circle had to be a living human, otherwise they wouldn’t be able to restrain the vengeful spirits.

The mystery person mustn’t have wanted to be exposed yet. Since they were already part of the circle, the entire array would collapse if they let go without warning and left a hole. But the array remained stable, which meant they were keeping to their role as an “iron bar” properly.

Consequently, there was even more reason for Xie Lian to act with caution. If the person realized that their presence had been discovered, they might flee. It also meant it would be quite difficult to find the person without attracting their notice and pick them out without disrupting the circle.

It didn’t take long for Xie Lian to come up with an idea, though, and he turned to Hua Cheng.

“San Lang, can you make your wraith butterflies chase the vengeful spirits without killing them? I mean, could they herd the spirits in a particular direction?”

Hua Cheng immediately understood what he wanted to do. “Yes, I can.”

Since the person had joined of their own volition, they were likely no simple character—they had no fear of the vengeful spirits. If Hua Cheng ordered the wraith butterflies to herd the vengeful spirits to the edges of the circle, the spirits would surely attempt to escape by searching for leaks. Almost any mortal could become a crack in the array, but one person would not—the one who had joined willingly!

“But this plan is risky,” Xie Lian said. “We might accidentally scare the others into letting go. We’d be shooting ourselves in the foot.”

“Don’t worry,” Hua Cheng said. “I’ll kill the vengeful spirits before that happens.”

The two formulated their plan, then Xie Lian raised his voice to speak to the crowd. “Everyone, watch out! The vengeful spirits have grown stronger! Just hold on and don’t be scared!”

“What?! Why would they get stronger all of a sudden?!” Heaven’s Eye exclaimed.

Hua Cheng didn’t move from his spot, but the wraith butterflies started chasing the foul mass of vengeful spirits, sending them scrambling away in a chaotic flurry. The beggars couldn’t tell what was going on, but the spiritual masters noticed something was amiss.

Heaven’s Eye was outraged. “Hua Cheng…zhu! What are you doing?!”

The two inside the circle had no time to mind him; they intently watched the pursuit. Sure enough, amidst the scrambling current of black smog that filled the air, there was one person the vengeful spirits didn’t even try to approach. The area before him was conspicuously empty.

That was their man!

Xie Lian darted forward and grabbed the man’s hands, at the same time bridging the hands of the two on either side, then plucked him out of the array.

Heaven's Eye and his party were growing restless. "What's going on?!"

"It's none of your business," Hua Cheng answered brusquely.

He was already at Xie Lian's side the moment he finished his statement, guarding him in case the mysterious man tried anything funny. Xie Lian restrained the man firmly and twisted him around. When he came face-to-face with the man, Xie Lian's eyes grew wide. The question *"Who are you?"* died in his throat.

"State Preceptor, it really was you…" Xie Lian mumbled as he stared at that face.

The man was shocked as well, and it took him a moment to mumble, "Your Highness…"

His face should've been incredibly familiar, but instead it was incredibly foreign. The state preceptor was older than thirty in Xie Lian's memories and had a rather poised disposition; he could fool anyone with a sweep of his sleeves and his aloof air. However, the man before him now looked not much older than he did, perhaps only twenty-five or twenty-six.

Even though Xie Lian had heard his voice inside the mountain spirit's body at Mount Tonglu, he'd been wondering since then whether he'd been mistaken—despite also thinking that the Emperor wasn't mistaken when he said, *"Your master is no ordinary character. If you do encounter him, be extremely careful!"* Either way, there was no doubt that the man before him was his master—the last State Preceptor of Xianle, Mei Nianqing!

The three of them stared at each other. The air inside the circle of three-hundred-some people seemed frozen.

When Mei Nianqing finally snapped out of it, he did something unexpected. While Xie Lian was still stunned, his master lunged forward to seize his throat with both hands!

But Hua Cheng was standing right next to them—how could he possibly allow Mei Nianqing to succeed? Hua Cheng barely moved, but Mei Nianqing was flung over a dozen meters away.

The sudden commotion surprised everyone holding hands in the circle.

“Why did they start fighting?!”

“What’s going on?!”

“Who are they hitting?!”

“Gege! Are you all right?” Hua Cheng exclaimed.

“I’m fine!” Xie Lian replied.

In fact, it was the state preceptor who didn’t look fine. Mei Nianqing coughed up blood from the blow and crawled to his feet before stumbling away, trying to escape the circle.

When Shi Qingxuan saw the man running toward him, he cried out anxiously, “What are you up to?! Hey, I’m warning you! Don’t you dare come over here! Your Highness! He’s trying to break the circle!”

“Return!” Xie Lian shouted.

Ruoye answered his command and shot forth! However, before it could wrap itself around Mei Nianqing, a sword plunged from the sky and pierced the ground before the state preceptor, blocking his way. White light flashed from the sky, shooting down in bright rays. Heralded by that shining curtain, a martial god clad in white armor descended from the heavens. Mei Nianqing's path of retreat had been fully sealed!

Blocked both in front and behind, Mei Nianqing had nowhere else to run. When he whirled around, he came face-to-face with Ruoye, which seemed to dance in mad joy as it bound him tightly and tripped him to the ground.

Xie Lian took a step forward. "My Lord? Why have you come here personally?"

Jun Wu rose to his feet, his expression solemn. "Mount Tonglu has been temporarily stabilized. I came to see how things were going on your end."

"How did you manage to stabilize it?" Xie Lian asked.

"I created a new barrier," Jun Wu replied. "The mountain spirits and other human creatures have been temporarily trapped."

But Xie Lian didn't care about the mountain spirits or other unrelated minions. "And…White No-Face?"

Jun Wu shook his head slowly. "I did not find him at Mount Tonglu. I am afraid he has long since escaped elsewhere."

Xie Lian looked at the screen of blinding light that surrounded them and separated them from the three-hundred-some people holding hands—the mortals outside the screen could not see what was going on within. He then looked down at the state preceptor, who had rolled around to face Jun Wu. Mei Nianqing likely remembered the vicious fight the two had in the past—he looked both shocked and furious, but wisely remained silent even as he raged inside.

Jun Wu inclined his head, watching him commandingly from above.

“Long time no see, State Preceptor of Xianle,” he commented languidly.

Looking nonchalant, Hua Cheng approached and gave Mei Nianqing a brief look. “The state preceptor looks pretty weak. How did he manage to escape back then?”

“It was not by his own strength,” Jun Wu said. “There were three helpers at his side at the time: the Deputy State Preceptors of Xianle.”

Xie Lian couldn’t hold back any longer.

“State Preceptor… Who are you, exactly?”

Mei Nianqing watched Jun Wu with a dark expression, his hands clenched into tight fists with veins bulging on the back. It was hard to tell whether he was furious that Jun Wu had ruined his plans or that Xie Lian had exposed him.

He paused for a moment before speaking under his breath.

“Haven’t you already guessed, Your Highness?”

He was one of the Four Guardians of the Crown Prince of Wuyong!

“And the Crown Prince of Wuyong?” Xie Lian pressed. “Is he White No-Face?”

Jun Wu was taken aback when he heard this. “Xianle,” Jun Wu asked, “who is the Crown Prince of Wuyong?”

Only then did Xie Lian remember he hadn’t yet had the chance to report to Jun Wu about Wuyong. Having finally captured the state preceptor, Xie Lian had many things to report and many questions to ask—but none of that business should be conducted here.

“My Lord, let’s talk when we return to the Upper Court.”

“That may be best,” Jun Wu said. He hummed for a moment, then added, “However, most of the vengeful spirits from Mount Tonglu were sent here to the royal capital, and they will not be suppressed quickly. It will take at least seven days and seven nights to do so, even if I am the one performing the purification.”

Would he have to wait seven days to interrogate the state preceptor? It would be far too late at that point—White No-Face was still at large! Xie Lian was contemplating what to do when Hua Cheng spoke up.

“Leave the mess here to me. You can go wherever you will.”

Xie Lian turned his gaze on him, but Hua Cheng had already guessed what he was going to say next.

“There’s no need to say anything else. I’ll wait for you down here. If gege really wants to thank me, just return to me quickly when you’re done.”

“Will that be all right?” Jun Wu said.

Xie Lian broke into a wide smile. “Mmm. Yes.”

A silhouette flickered outside the screen of light, and someone came charging in from outside, hobbling and hopping and shouting. “Your Highness! Your Highness, what are you doing in here? Is everything all right?”

It was Shi Qingxuan. When Jun Wu had descended and pulled the screen of light around them, no one outside knew what was happening and they were all scared to death. Shi Qingxuan had bravely stepped up and charged inside to see what was going on. If anyone else had tried, they might have been blocked. But he had worked as a heavenly official, so the screen of light recognized him and allowed him to enter.

As soon as he made it inside, he froze in shock. “M-M-M-M-My Lord?! Why’d you…come here personally?!”

When Jun Wu saw him, he gave a light smile. “Lord Wind Master. How have you been?”

“…”

Shi Qingxuan was hesitant, shy, and rather embarrassed. After all, by now there was no way Jun Wu didn’t know the whole sordid affair with Shi Wudu—how he had altered his younger brother’s fate and sent him to the heavens. The story had surely spread and caused a riot. Now that he was face-to-face with his former boss, Shi Qingxuan’s mind was consumed by shame and guilt. However, Jun Wu didn’t mention the topic at all and treated him with utmost courtesy and full respect.

Xie Lian withdrew Ruoye, and Mei Nianqing slowly rose to his feet on his own.

After Shi Qingxuan was done being shy, he asked, puzzled, “Who’s this? What’s happening right now?”

Mei Nianqing glanced at him. “You’re Shi Qingxuan, aren’t you?”

“And who are you?” Shi Qingxuan replied in surprise. “How do you know my name?”

But a more important question would be: how did Mei Nianqing manage to recognize him as he looked now?!

Mei Nianqing scoffed. “Your name’s terrible.”

“Huh?” Shi Qingxuan was baffled.

However, Mei Nianqing didn’t say another word. He willingly followed Jun Wu, seeming fairly obedient—probably because he knew that without any helpers at his side, there was no way he'd escape from Jun Wu's grasp, even unbound.

"Xianle, I will bring him to the heavens," Jun Wu said. "Will you be joining us shortly?"

"Yes," Xie Lian replied.

Jun Wu nodded at him, then he departed with his prisoner. Xie Lian turned to Hua Cheng, but before he could say anything, Hua Cheng spoke.

"Gege, you don't have to worry. It's only a matter of looking after the circle and making sure they don't mess up. It's not hard."

Shi Qingxuan chimed in. "Your Highness, are you gonna head up? Go, go. I'll keep an eye on things too—don't worry!"

Xie Lian nodded. "Thank you both for your hard work."

In the past, Hua Cheng would have likely replied with "It's nothing" or some other modest niceties. Yet this time, unexpectedly, he hugged his arms and sighed.

"It *is* rather hard work."

"…" Xie Lian sensed he was hinting at something.

Meanwhile, Shi Qingxuan sensed nothing, and he said excitedly, "Yeah, remember to reward us for our hard work afterward! How about throwing a feast at the royal capital's best restaurant? Ha ha ha…"

Shi Qingxuan still couldn't forget about feasting at the city's finest establishment. Xie Lian thought, *Lord Wind Master…please stop talking. That wasn't what he meant at all…*

Hua Cheng shook his head. He quirked his eyebrows and absently played with the red coral pearl tied at the end of his small braid. "It would be fine if gege were here beside me," he said with apparent nonchalance. "But to think he's going up there again, leaving me down here all by myself, hmm… The work feels harder now."

Shi Qingxuan finally noticed that something sounded weird, but he still didn't get it. With a face full of smiles, he said, "Crimson Rain Sought Flower, you're so funny. It sounds like you're saying you're gonna be lonely now that His Highness is going back up to the heavens—like you're newlyweds or something! Ha ha ha…"

"…"

You're not wrong, Xie Lian thought. *Isn't that exactly what he meant?!*

Shi Qingxuan laughed stiffly for a while, and Xie Lian finally couldn't bear it any longer. He cleared his throat.

"Um, Lord Wind Master, will you…will you step outside? Just for a moment, okay?"

"Huh? Why?" Shi Qingxuan asked.

Xie Lian couldn't explain. "Just… Just step outside. We need to say our farewells."

Only then did Shi Qingxuan exit, confused. Now, it was just the two of them inside the screen of light, not another soul present.

Xie Lian turned around. Hua Cheng was still watching him with one eyebrow raised. He seemed to be waiting for him to say something—or do something.

Thus, Xie Lian gathered his courage, placed two stiff hands on Hua Cheng's shoulders, and steadied himself for a moment before he hopped up and pecked him on the cheek. After having done so, he looked around with a hollow conscience like a thief and only relaxed when he confirmed no one else was present. Yet unexpectedly, the next second, he felt something tighten around his waist—it was Hua Cheng, hugging him close.

“Gege, are you just placating me?”

His unhappy tone was half-serious, half-fake. It was somewhat worrying to hear.

Startled, Xie Lian quickly exclaimed, “I’m not!”

“Really?” Hua Cheng said. “But you weren’t like this at all when you were borrowing spiritual power from me. Is this the sort of farewell I get now that I’m not lending you my power?”

“…”

Now that he thought about it, Xie Lian worried that he wasn’t being sincere. In a small voice, he said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

But after apologizing, the more he thought about it, the more it seemed like that really was how he had come across. Alarms began to blare in his head. Scared he might be misunderstood, Xie Lian didn’t wait for Hua Cheng’s response; without another word, he moved to act. He jumped up and hugged Hua Cheng around the neck, throwing himself on him—and this time, he fully kissed Hua Cheng just where he wanted.

As luck would have it, Shi Qingxuan chose just that moment to interrupt. “Your Highness, I keep thinking about it, and the more I think the weirder it feels. If you two are just saying your farewells, there’s no need to kick me out, you know? I’m just… Your Highness? Why’d he leave so fast?”

Xie Lian had fled the scene, fumbling and stumbling.

Chapter 111:
Evil Enters the Mirror, Nowhere to Hide

EVEN ONCE HE'D FUMBLED and stumbled onto the main avenue of the Heavenly Capital, Xie Lian was still covering half his face with his hand and was wobbly and unsteady on his feet. While none of the junior heavenly officials hurrying down the street dared approach him to ask about it, they all stared at him strangely nonetheless.

Xie Lian quickly dropped his hand, straightened his back, and rubbed at his mouth unnaturally. "My lips kind of hurt," he muttered. "Don't know what's going on, ha ha…"

The looks the junior officials gave him became even stranger. What exactly did he do to make his lips hurt?

They really did hurt a little. When he jumped up into that kiss, he'd used too much force; Hua Cheng most likely felt the impact as well, but Xie Lian very clearly felt him smile when he pressed close. He didn't dare to think more on the subject, just hurried onward with his head down—and the other heavenly officials didn't stop him, all rushing their own ways.

Perhaps Mount Tonglu's opening had become too hectic an affair, as the air in the Upper Court was solemn and uneasy. There were already many heavenly officials gathered within the Palace of Divine Might. While the vengeful spirits of Mount Tonglu had been sent in all directions, the majority were sent to the most populous city, the royal capital. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng had toiled for so long because they chose the largest and most difficult task; everyone else had only faced a few hundred of those creatures and had long since finished them off. Pei Ming, Feng Xin, and the others were already back at the Heavenly Capital, their faces lined with fatigue.

When Xie Lian crossed into the hall and looked up, the first one he came face-to-face with was Lang Qianqiu—someone he hadn't seen in a long time.

Lang Qianqiu's face was gloomy. When he first saw Xie Lian he was surprised, then he promptly turned away.

The silent crowd was lost deep in their own thoughts. Jun Wu was on the throne; he sat up a little when he saw Xie Lian arrive, ready to speak to him, but Lang Qianqiu stepped forward before he could do so.

"My Lord, I heard you've already caught the Green Ghost Qi Rong."

Jun Wu tipped his gaze to him. "That is correct. However, the Green Ghost Qi Rong, the ghost woman Xuan Ji, and the rest were not captured by my own hand. They were consigned to heaven's custody by Yin Yu of Ghost City."

It was only then that Xie Lian noticed that Yin Yu was there. It couldn't be helped; Yin Yu really had no presence at all. Speaking of which, this was the first time Yin Yu had entered the Palace of Divine Might. No one but the highest-ranking heavenly officials could set foot in this hall without Jun Wu's permission. Yin Yu didn't have the right to enter when he was a heavenly official because his rank was too low, but he could finally formally enter now that he had "willingly fallen" to Ghost City's ranks. Truly, it elicited conflicting feelings.

Lang Qianqiu cut right to the point. "Qi Rong is the villain who destroyed my clan. I pray My Lord leaves him at my disposal."

Jun Wu glanced at Xie Lian and deliberated for a moment. “It is not that handing him over to you would be a problem. However, I ask you this: once you have dealt with the Green Ghost Qi Rong, what comes next? What will you do?”

Before, Lang Qianqiu had threatened that he would come looking for Xie Lian after he was done with Qi Rong. Jun Wu was well aware of this fact.

Lang Qianqiu’s voice was hard. “That is not My Lord’s concern. My Lord can’t possibly plan on harboring Qi Rong just because I will not answer this question, and in doing so, prevent me from avenging my family?”

In the past, Lang Qianqiu rarely said anything within the Palace of Divine Might, and even when he did, it was always something silly. Yet now, his words mirrored the consuming resentment in his expression and tone. It was not good for him to be in this state, and Pei Ming spoke up.

“His Highness Tai Hua seems to have quite the temper today, eh? Of course My Lord doesn’t plan on acquitting—”

Just as he was trying to smooth things over, a commotion came from outside the hall and someone charged inside.

“My Lord, I can’t wait any longer!”

It was Mu Qing. He was dressed all in black, and his expression was grim as his clothing. Several martial officials trailed behind him; they were supposed to be responsible for apprehending him, but how could they possibly be capable of that feat? They could only rush inside with him.

“My Lord, we were just escorting General Xuan Zhen to—”

With one hand propping up his cheek, Jun Wu sighed. “I understand. Stand down.” He gave a dismissive wave, then a moment later, lifted his head and gazed at Mu Qing. “And so?”

“And so, I cannot continue to endure these baseless accusations,” Mu Qing categorically proclaimed. “Hasn’t My Lord already captured that woman? I want to confront her face-to-face!”

Lang Qianqiu spoke up as well. “My Lord, please give me the Green Ghost Qi Rong!”

Neither was quiet with their demands, and they were causing quite a scene. It was clearly giving Jun Wu a headache.

“Silence!” he ordered. “Can neither of you wait until I have finished dealing with Mount Tonglu?”

“If My Lord needs to manage the vengeful spirits leaking from the Kiln, then you need hands,” Mu Qing reasoned. “What’s the use in keeping me locked up? Why not allow me a chance to clear my name so I can return to my service in the Upper Court? The truth will come out as long as My Lord brings her here and allows me to confront her!”

His words were logical, and he would likely be relentless if he wasn’t given his way.

And so Jun Wu could only command, “Bring in the ghost woman Jian Lan.”

Soon, Jian Lan was brought forth. She carried a swaddled bundle that emitted chilling black qi in her arms. Something ghastly pale peeked out of the bundle and bared its teeth and claws before Jian Lan stuffed it back inside—here a part that somewhat resembled a hand, there a part that somewhat resembled bones. The arresting officers hadn’t restrained Jian

Lan, likely to save Feng Xin face. Feng Xin swallowed lightly, meeting her eyes for a moment—Jian Lan looked away first. Feng Xin's gaze then fell on the bundle of swaddling clothes in her arms, and his expression grew even more complicated.

On the other hand, Mu Qing's patience was already exhausted, and he began to speak the moment she arrived. "I don't know why your son must slander me, but it knows that I'm not to blame. It must be following someone's orders."

He had basically lost his composure, but Xie Lian could understand. Mu Qing cared deeply about face, and having this slander hung over his head for so long had naturally made his temper overflow. This had gone so far that it was even affecting his duty in the Upper Court.

"And do you have a theory about who is controlling it?" Jun Wu questioned.

Mu Qing didn't speak, but his eyes moved. Everyone could tell he was looking at Jian Lan.

The veins on Feng Xin's forehead pulsed. "What are you implying? Do you think she would make her son slander you on purpose?!"

Mu Qing withdrew his gaze. "I didn't say anything of the sort."

"Then why were you looking at her?" Feng Xin exclaimed. "She bears no grudge against you, so why would she do such a thing?"

Mu Qing glared at him. "There's certainly no grudge between me and her, but who knows about *you*."

"And what do you mean by that?" Feng Xin demanded. "Just spit it out all at once!"

Mu Qing glanced at Xie Lian before continuing to address Feng Xin. “You became acquainted with Lady Jian Lan during the time of His Highness’s first banishment, right?”

The other officials followed suit and looked at Xie Lian, who was utterly flummoxed—how had he gotten dragged into this again?

Feng Xin glanced at him too and growled a quiet response through his teeth. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Mu Qing decided it was time to risk it all and ripped everything out into the open. “Everything, of course. At the time, life by His Highness’s side was enormously difficult, and you hated me to the bone for returning to the Middle Court. You love dredging up old conflicts and berating me for any mistakes. And she was your bedmate, so how could she *not* hate me thanks to your subliminal influence? Who knows, maybe she started hating His Highness too. And in the end, you never followed through with taking her away and instead chose your wretched loyalty. It was practically abandonment—”

“Enough of your bullshit!” roared Feng Xin, unable to bear another word.

His fist flew out, and Mu Qing raised his own to return the blow. Jian Lan went over to stop them, but the fetus spirit began to cackle strangely, sounding like the chaotic cries of an old crow—horrific to hear. Pei Ming and Yin Yu separated Feng Xin and Mu Qing and pulled them back, while Quan Yizhen stayed on the sidelines staring; he seemed to be contemplating who’d win if they continued their fight. In any case, it was a mess in the hall.

Xie Lian stood there quietly for a long while, hanging his head. After a moment, he sighed. “My Lord, the priority right now should be finding White No-Face and managing Human Face Disease. The person we captured earlier is the most important piece of the puzzle.”

Jun Wu couldn’t watch any longer either, and he waved his hand. “Take the ghost woman Jian Lan and the fetus spirit away. Bring forth the State Preceptor of Xianle.”

“No! I’ve gotta see—what?!” Mu Qing shouted.

“Bring who?!” Feng Xin cried, dumbfounded.

They both looked to the hall’s entrance as a martial official escorted someone inside—someone with whom they were very familiar. It was none other than Mei Nianqing, the State Preceptor of Xianle.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were both flabbergasted.

“State preceptor? Is it really the state preceptor?” Feng Xin asked.

Although Mu Qing didn’t reply, he was equally stunned and uncertain. They couldn’t be blamed; in truth, this still felt surreal to Xie Lian. He couldn’t connect this man with the state preceptor who had once asked him a question about two men and a cup of water.

Mei Nianqing slowly stepped forward, brushing past Xie Lian. Jun Wu remained seated upon his throne overlooking the great hall.

“Xianle, you seemed to have something to say when we were down below.”

Xie Lian inclined his head slightly. “Yes.”

Selecting the most important details, he gave a report of his journey to Mount Tonglu and the incidents that occurred while exploring the

Kingdom of Wuyong. The longer the crowd listened, the wider their eyes grew. Feng Xin and Mu Qing were positively floored.

After Xie Lian finished his report, Jun Wu finally spoke. “And yet I have never heard of the Kingdom of Wuyong.”

The other officials all agreed.

“I’ve never heard of it before either…”

“It was two thousand years ago, after all.”

“Traces of it must’ve been wiped intentionally.”

Mei Nianqing hadn’t spoken a single word throughout. Xie Lian turned to him.

“State Preceptor, the Crown Prince of Wuyong is White No-Face, am I correct?”

“Yes,” Mei Nianqing answered.

He knew it!

“Then who left those murals behind? And who destroyed the last painting?” Pei Ming mused.

“I don’t know who left the murals,” Xie Lian responded. “But I imagine the last painting was destroyed by White No-Face or his subordinates. After all, he didn’t want anyone to discover his identity.” He turned to Mei Nianqing. “And *you* are a subordinate of the Crown Prince of Wuyong.”

Which made him a subordinate of White No-Face.

Mei Nianqing didn’t reply.

Xie Lian had a sudden urge to ask him if he had known that strange creature was White No-Face back when Xianle fell. Had they been colluding? Had the state preceptor *helped*?

However, he asked a different question in the end.

“Where is White No-Face right now?”

“…”

“Why did White No-Face want to bring ruin to Xianle?” Xie Lian questioned.

“…”

“Why do you want to kill me?” Xie Lian demanded.

Mei Nianqing finally spoke. “Your Highness, I don’t want to kill you.”

“Then why did you go for my throat down there?” Xie Lian asked.

“If I strangled you, would you have died?” Mei Nianqing asked back. “Would the one beside you have let me succeed?”

That was true. But that didn’t mean Mei Nianqing didn’t have killing intent—his reaction at the time seemed subconscious.

Mei Nianqing probably knew he couldn’t convince Xie Lian, so he stopped trying to argue.

After a moment of silence, Xie Lian finally asked the question he most wanted the answer to. “What did you want to awaken in me?”

Jun Wu had told him the state preceptor seemed to want to awaken something within him. But what could that be?

Mei Nianqing stared at him strangely. Inside his sleeves, Xie Lian’s hands were clenched into fists.

“State Preceptor, go ahead. Tell me.”

Xie Lian had been vaguely uneasy all this time. The Crown Prince of Wuyong's fate was so similar to his own—was there really a hidden link between him and White No-Face? He couldn't abide any sort of connection to a creature like that, but he was terrified that he'd discover he truly had one. Still, he had to know the truth.

Mei Nianqing watched him, and a moment later, he replied, "Your Highness, it's not quite the right time for me to address the questions you've asked. You might not believe me even if I answered." After a pause, he continued, "However, there is one thing I can tell you…" He pronounced each word slowly and clearly. "White No-Face…is inside the Palace of Divine Might right now. He is standing before me!"

And who was standing before him?

Xie Lian!

Xie Lian instantly backed a few steps away, like he wanted to avoid standing in that spot.

The closest person was Feng Xin, and he exclaimed, "State Preceptor, you… Open your eyes and look properly at who's in front of you. It's His Highness! Your disciple!"

However, other voices could be heard whispering from elsewhere in the room. The heavenly officials had begun to gossip amongst themselves.

"Could it be…that His Highness and White No-Face share…a split soul?!"

"What's a split soul?!"

"It's when a person's soul is split—broken into two pieces! Each half has its own memories, and their personalities and skills can be different too. Perhaps even their appearance…"

"That's possible…"

"I've heard of cases like that too!"

"If that's really true, what should we do? His Highness the crown prince is the White-Clothed Calamity?!"

So many voices filled the air, and even Xie Lian himself began to have doubts. Was he White No-Face?! Was that really the truth?! Was he the one who brought ruin to Xianle? Was he the one who had tortured himself for eight hundred years? Was he to blame for everything that had happened?!

The whispers in the hall were deafeningly loud, and the heavenly officials' faces were written with all manner of expressions. Even Feng Xin didn't know what to say anymore, or what to believe.

As for Jun Wu, he stood up. "Xianle, calm yourself!"

Xie Lian was falling apart. "I…I…"

Had it all really been his fault?! If it truly was, then what should he do? He didn't know!

Just as he was drowning in confusion, a voice rang out in his mind. *"It's not possible! I can swear that you are you. You're no one else. Trust me."*

"…"

San Lang. San Lang!

Hua Cheng had told him that this couldn't be—it could never be his fault!

Xie Lian's mind instantly cleared. He steadied himself, finding his footing once more.

Jun Wu, however, had already descended from his throne and come to his side. “Xianle! Calm down first—”

Just as Xie Lian was about to look up and give a response, Mei Nianqing suddenly reached out and yanked the sword hung at Feng Xin’s waist from its sheath. Brandishing it, he lunged at Jun Wu!

All the heavenly officials cried out in alarm. However, Jun Wu and Xie Lian were both martial gods—the best in their field, no less—how could they be caught by such a low-level sneak attack? Xie Lian seized the shining blade between two fingers with lightning speed right in front of his face before the point could even touch Jun Wu!

Feng Xin regained his senses and rushed forward to restrain the state preceptor. He dared to attempt an assassination within the Palace of Divine Might, and in front of so many martial gods—he was asking for death!

“State Preceptor, this is pointless!” Feng Xin exclaimed.

As Mei Nianqing struggled in vain, he roared at Xie Lian, “*Look!* Look, quickly!”

Yin Yu rushed over. “Your Highness! Are you all right? What happened?”

“Look at what?” Mu Qing cried in alarm from further away. “What does he mean? What is he up to?”

Xie Lian stood still in the center of the pandemonium. For a long time, he didn’t move a muscle.

It wasn’t for the sake of the chaos around him, but because he had seen something reflected in that snow-white blade.

A face.

A man’s composed, handsome face.

And there were three other faces growing on it!

The three smaller faces were squished onto the man’s face, ruining his good looks and twisting them into something horrifying. They had contorted the man’s features—half of his face appeared to be crying, while the other half appeared to be smiling.

It was a face that should have been endlessly familiar to Xie Lian. And yet, in the reflection of that mirror-like blade, it was so foreign it was terrifying—Xie Lian found himself drenched in cold sweat. Only then did he remember that the sword Feng Xin carried with him was Hongjing, the mirror that reveals evil. When evil entered that mirror, it could not hide.

From this angle, it wasn’t Xie Lian’s face that Hongjing reflected but the face of the one standing behind him. And upon that face was a pair of dark, solemn eyes that watched him closely.

It was as if all his movements had slowed. Xie Lian’s pupils shrank. His mouth opened. But before he could say a word, his arm went stiff.

A powerful hand had seized his wrist. Behind him, Jun Wu was smiling.

“Xianle, what are you looking at?”

Chapter 112:
Chaos in the Upper Court, Nefarious Wave Shakes the Heavens

IT HAD BEEN CENTURIES since Xie Lian last felt such chills down his spine.

Mei Nianqing had declared that White No-Face was standing before him. He'd assumed his master was referring to him, but he failed to realize—although Xie Lian was indeed standing in front of Mei Nianqing, Jun Wu was standing behind Xie Lian!

The only thing was…he had never suspected Jun Wu in the slightest. The revelation startled him so badly that his hair stood on end. Xie Lian struggled a bit but couldn't loosen Jun Wu's powerful grip on him in the slightest.

He said, in spite of himself, "You… Your face…"

Jun Wu seemed to pay it no mind, sounding like he had just noticed a trifling mistake. "Ah. A moment's carelessness and they're out again."

Another wave of excruciating pain coursed through Xie Lian's wrist, and he finally couldn't grip the sword anymore. His fingers went slack, and the longsword dropped to the ground with a clear, resounding *clang*.

However, it was too late. Many of the nearby heavenly officials had seen the horrifying face reflected in Hongjing, just as Xie Lian had!

A blanket of dead silence covered the great hall. Almost every heavenly official was stunned, including Feng Xin, who stood the closest and had seen everything clearly. Mei Nianqing used this chance to break free of his hold and grabbed Hongjing from the ground, raising it with both hands to stand it in front of Jun Wu.

“Everyone, look closely! Look at the face of the man standing here!”

Some of the martial gods finally came to their senses. Brandishing his sword, Pei Ming rushed forward and shouted, “Who are you?!”

The heavenly officials standing farther away didn’t understand what was happening, and they started calling out.

“What’s going on?!”

“Who is General Pei talking to?”

“How could he point a sword at the Emperor?!”

Mei Nianqing glared unblinkingly at Jun Wu. He enunciated each word as he stated, “*He* is White No-Face!”

Mu Qing was dumbstruck. “How could he be White No-Face? Is White No-Face impersonating the Emperor? Where’s the real Emperor?”

That made Xie Lian wonder if there had been a clandestine switch at some point—but then how long had the supposed substitute been around? Why hadn’t he noticed anything amiss? The Heavenly Emperor wasn’t like the elusive, low-key Earth Master—an imposter couldn’t have gone unnoticed by the entire Upper Court!

Mei Nianqing was just about to speak again when Jun Wu raised his hand with a sigh.

“You’ve disappointed me again.”

Mei Nianqing’s face abruptly dropped, and it seemed like he had been seized in a choke hold. Lang Qianqiu picked up his greatsword and slashed out a flurry of gales, but he was sent flying backward with a single glancing look from Jun Wu.

In the next moment, Pei Ming, Lang Qianqiu, Feng Xin, Mu Qing, Quan Yizhen, and almost all the martial gods inside the Palace of Divine Might surged forward to surround and attack Jun Wu.

An incense time later, every one of those gods lay sprawled on the ground, defeated. Jun Wu was still gripping Xie Lian's wrist.

The floor of the Great Hall was littered with martial gods who had lost their spiritual powers; only Jun Wu and Xie Lian remained standing. Mu Qing hacked up a mouthful of blood and shouted angrily at Xie Lian, who stood frozen and silent in place.

"Move! Do something! What are you zoning out for?! Are you waiting to be killed?!"

But he didn't know—it wasn't that Xie Lian didn't want to move, it was that he *couldn't* move, not a bit! Although Jun Wu was merely gripping him with a single hand, Xie Lian thought he would notice and immediately stop him should he even slightly curl a finger—retaliation was completely out of the question. From whichever angle he judged, the best plan was to remain still and cautious.

Such was the power of the number one martial god of all three realms!

The heavenly officials standing at the room's outer edges had scattered in fear. It was a moment before they remembered to escape, and, faces pale, they attempted to rush out of the Palace of Divine Might. They only made it to the entrance before the heavy, glamorous doors closed on their own, leaving the officials to slap at them futilely. The nearly one hundred heavenly officials inside the hall either couldn't get out or couldn't get up; pure chaos reigned.

An unseen force yanked Mei Nianqing's body forward, and Jun Wu grabbed ahold of his collar, smiling as he did.

"Did you think I didn't have a plan if you changed your mind last minute and opened your mouth in front of everyone? Did you think they would pose a threat to me once they knew and joined forces? I could annihilate them all with a single hand."

It seemed that Jun Wu hadn't brought Mei Nianqing up first just to give Xie Lian a chance to say goodbye to Hua Cheng. He had threatened Mei Nianqing with something, which was why the state preceptor had allowed himself to be interrogated in the hall without resistance or complaint. Who could've guessed that he would change his mind at the last second?

He clutched Jun Wu's sleeves and shouted to Xie Lian, "Your Highness, run away! He's gone mad!"

"State Preceptor!" Xie Lian exclaimed.

A moment later, Mei Nianqing couldn't speak another word—it was as if something was choking him. But he was always dressed in robes that covered his neck, so Xie Lian couldn't clearly see what was wrong.

"You silly fool," Jun Wu sighed. "That was no different from throwing them into a pit of fire. This affair had nothing to do with them, but now no one will leave the Heavenly Capital alive."

With things this dire, Xie Lian called into the spiritual communication array, *"San Lang!"*

He had never recited Hua Cheng's verbal password to access his private communication array before, but he didn't have time to worry about being shy in such dangerous circumstances. And yet, even after reciting it a few times, he received no response; there was nothing but silence on the other end.

Just as it had been in Mount Tonglu's domain, spiritual communication was blocked!

With only a glance, Jun Wu could tell what he was thinking. "No need to keep trying. You cannot reach him if I do not allow it."

The Heavenly Capital was built on Jun Wu's power; this was his domain, and he reigned supreme within it. Of course he could do whatever he wanted here, which also meant the entire Upper Court—indeed, the entire Heavenly Capital—had become thoroughly isolated. Truly, they were now *"Crying for the heavens in vain; crying for the earth to no avail."* [2]

Suddenly, the doors of the Palace of Divine Might burst open. The heavenly officials regained their spirit and were about to rejoice, but they were shocked again when they saw who was standing in the entrance. A tall, black-clad man stood outside the hall, blocking everyone's way out. His aura was chilling and unapproachable. It was Ling Wen wearing the Brocade Immortal!

The heavenly officials had no idea what to do as Ling Wen crossed the threshold and entered the hall, bending one knee to the ground before Jun Wu.

"My Lord," he said with solemn respect.

"Rise and get to work," Jun Wu ordered. "You know what to do."

Ling Wen inclined his head and smiled. "Of course."

Mu Qing struggled to his feet using the wall as support, both shocked and dubious upon seeing this display. “Wasn’t Ling Wen still at large in Mount Tonglu territory?”

“That is correct,” Jun Wu replied. “However, Ling Wen is very useful—much more useful than most heavenly officials. She is a rare talent. Her actions were nothing but an insignificant mistake, so I have summoned her back.”

Indeed, Ling Wen’s mistake in creating the Brocade Immortal was truly “insignificant” compared to what the White-Clothed Calamity had done. And now, both Ling Wen and the Brocade Immortal were “Jun Wu’s” subordinates. A small white shadow leapt forward in a flash and latched onto Jun Wu’s foot, then started nuzzling his boot.

When he recognized it, Feng Xin cried angrily, “What are you doing?! Get back here!”

That thing was the fetus spirit. Not only did it disobey the words of its own father, but it even maliciously snaked its tongue at him. Feng Xin had just been beaten to the ground by Jun Wu, spewing blood, and now his own son was hugging the leg of the enemy who had wounded him like it had no idea who its dad was. He was so furious that he could puke up blood again.

A troop of expressionless martial gods poured into the hall soon after. They were officials Jun Wu had personally appointed, and they only obeyed his command. Ling Wen received control of them from Jun Wu and gave them their orders.

“Escort all of the heavenly officials to their palaces and monitor them.”

Pei Ming was sitting nearby, his expression complicated. “Ling Wen, how heartless of you.”

Ling Wen patted his shoulder. “You’ve known of my heartlessness since the day we met. How about it, wanna join us? You’re always welcome.”

Pei Ming gave a dry chuckle but didn’t reply.

Once again, Xie Lian received special treatment—Jun Wu would personally escort him back to the Palace of Xianle.

“Come,” Jun Wu beckoned.

Xie Lian glanced back at Mei Nianqing. *Just what is going on? Who are you? What did you want to achieve? Who is this person—is he Jun Wu or White No-Face? What is he planning?* There were far too many questions he wanted to ask, but the answers would need to be given in great detail and in private. Only Mei Nianqing could provide the information, but Jun Wu would hardly give him the chance.

The moment they left the Palace of Divine Might, Xie Lian was shocked. Nefarious clouds rolled across the gloomy skies above the great avenue of the Heavenly Capital. All had changed in the blink of an eye, and the once-scintillating brightness was no more. Only the martial guard under Jun Wu’s direct command still acted as they usually did as they escorted every heavenly official back to their palaces. There was a choking aura of somber unease. The junior officials who had been rushing about were now sprawled unconscious across the ground.

Needless to say, this had to be Jun Wu’s doing. From afar, the bell tolled again and again—*dong, dong.* It seemed to be the source of the problem here.

They walked slowly along the great avenue of the Heavenly Capital toward the Palace of Xianle. On the way, Xie Lian racked his brain trying to think of a way to escape. But he was no match for Jun Wu, and any clever tricks he could think of would be completely useless against the Emperor. Besides, Jun Wu didn't just have martial might—he could always see through Xie Lian and understand exactly what he was thinking.

By the time they entered the Palace of Xianle, Xie Lian still hadn't come up with anything, and he told himself to let it go. It didn't matter if he couldn't think of anything. If he didn't contact Hua Cheng, he'd definitely notice that something was amiss soon…as long as things didn't get out of hand before that happened.

However, as soon as the doors shut, Jun Wu suddenly asked, "Are you thinking about Crimson Rain Sought Flower?"

"…"

Jun Wu's words made Xie Lian's pounding heart jump to his throat, and he didn't know how to respond. If he said yes, would Jun Wu do something to Hua Cheng? But Jun Wu might not believe him if he said no.

At his lack of a response, Jun Wu smiled. "No need to fret; I know you must. I'm sure you really want to talk to him."

The way he spoke to Xie Lian was the same as it had ever been: warm, tolerant, composed, dependable. There was no change. But the more he acted like this, the more confused and terrified Xie Lian became.

"If you really miss him, then why not connect with him for a bit to chat?" Jun Wu continued.

"…"

He had guessed what Xie Lian was thinking when they entered the palace. Everything was within his grasp!

Jun Wu's smile remained unchanged. "Xianle, you know what to say to him. Do not let him worry. And I am sure that Crimson Rain Sought Flower of yours will be very happy you took the initiative to reach out to him."

Then he placed a hand on Xie Lian's shoulder. Xie Lian felt a subtle wave of movement, and he knew Jun Wu had cast some sort of spell that allowed him to hear every word said in their communication array. Even if Jun Wu couldn't speak directly, he could still listen in, and Xie Lian already knew what he wanted to hear him say to Hua Cheng.

After a pause, Xie Lian gathered his courage and boldly said Hua Cheng's verbal password out loud. Jun Wu seemed to find it funny—he even chuckled a bit. However, Xie Lian had no time to be embarrassed or shy. It only took a moment for Hua Cheng's voice to ring out next to Xie Lian's ears.

"Gege, gege," he sighed. "It's been so long. You've finally remembered San Lang."

Xie Lian exchanged a look with Jun Wu. "San Lang, it hasn't even been two hours since I left."

"To me, the point is that you *left*, not that you've only been gone two hours," Hua Cheng said. "Even for an instant, separation is separation."

Jun Wu was listening in right next to him, you know! Even taking his perilous circumstances into account, Xie Lian still managed to feel some genuine embarrassment.

"Unfortunately, he will have to wait longer than two hours," Jun Wu said. "Continue. Tell him that he will not be able to see you until the vengeful spirits have been taken care of. Do not attempt to give any roundabout hints. I can hear everything."

It would take seven days and seven nights to dispose of the vengeful spirits. After a pause, Xie Lian said, "If you can't even wait for two hours, what will you do if I need to be away for longer?"

"Did Jun Wu stuff a big bunch of missions into your arms?" Hua Cheng asked.

"Yeah," Xie Lian replied.

"Let me help," Hua Cheng said.

"Tell him that I will permit you to take a three-year break after you complete your missions," Jun Wu directed.

"There's no need," Xie Lian said. "San Lang, you've already been a great help guarding the array for me. Just let me handle everything else. The Emperor already said that I can have a three-year break after I complete the missions; I won't have to do anything else."

"Only three years?" Hua Cheng asked.

"Is three years not enough?" Xie Lian said. "It's already a perk."

"All right, fine. But…" Hua Cheng continued languidly, "Gege, that's *your* perk. What about mine?"

"Wh…what perk?" Xie Lian asked.

"What do you think?" Hua Cheng asked back.

When Hua Cheng asked that question, Xie Lian could practically see his quirked brow and curved lips. What could he possibly say to that?

“Speaking of which, gege still owes me quite a bit of spiritual power, am I wrong?” Hua Cheng continued.

“No,” Xie Lian replied cautiously.

“Then has gege thought of how he’ll repay me?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Not really…” Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng huffed a laugh. “Since you haven’t thought of anything, then why don’t you let me decide? Once everything is over and done with and you’re on your vacation, gege can take his time to pay me back. How’s that sound?”

Xie Lian was forced to defend against his attacks while sneaking glimpses at Jun Wu like a guilty thief. He answered with random affirming noises. “Oh, mmm, yeah…”

Having slyly guided him to this point step by step and receiving the answer he wanted to hear, Hua Cheng was finally satisfied and temporarily let him off the hook. “So what can I do for you? It’s so rare for gege to seek me out through spiritual communication.”

Jun Wu eyed Xie Lian. The reason he had allowed him to communicate with Hua Cheng was to keep the Ghost King out of this—to make him think everything was fine and get him to stay obediently in the Mortal Realm.

Xie Lian knew what kind of answer Jun Wu wanted to hear, so he replied slowly, “Actually, it’s not really anything. I was just afraid that you’d be worried after I’d been gone for so long.”

“Hmm?” Hua Cheng wondered. “Didn’t gege say it yourself? You haven’t even been gone two hours. Why would you worry that I’d be worried?”

Xie Lian was getting dizzy from going around in circles with him. He felt a little anxious but also a little amused.

Suddenly, Hua Cheng said, “Oh, I get it.”

Xie Lian’s breath hitched. “What do you get?”

Hua Cheng seemed to chuckle on the other end. A moment later, he replied leisurely, “Gege, maybe *you’re* the one who’s missing me so keenly after being apart for such a short while?”

“…”

Even if Xie Lian managed to cover up their feelings with ambiguity earlier, this line was too honest and exposed, and he couldn’t pretend to reply casually. Under Jun Wu’s watchful gaze, Xie Lian’s face grew hot.

A moment later, he replied softly, “…Yes.”

Hua Cheng’s reply was soft as well. “Me too. I really want to go up there right now and whisk you away.”

While Xie Lian’s heart was warmed by this, it also felt like it was suspended in the air. His eyes met Jun Wu’s. If Hua Cheng really did come to the Heavenly Capital, how would things end? How would Jun Wu handle him?

Xie Lian suppressed his emotions and did his best to sound natural. “Nah, it’s okay. It’s a mess up here in the heavens right now. If you come, they’ll probably lose their heads. Just wait a bit longer.”

“I understand, gege. I won’t show up and scare them,” Hua Cheng replied lazily. “I hate that glaring light in the Heavenly Capital, and I still have to watch over this circle of people. I’ll just wait here nicely for gege to come back.”

Xie Lian couldn’t tell if he had sighed in relief or broken out in a cold sweat. “Yes, be good.”

“But,” Hua Cheng said, “if I’m going to be good, gege can’t come back empty-handed. I need a reward.”

“Of course, of course,” Xie Lian replied.

The two exchanged a few more casual words, ambiguous and questionable, unable to part. They bade each other farewell repeatedly before finally ending the communication.

Xie Lian softly huffed a breath, and Jun Wu commented, “It seems Xianle has been living an exciting life down below.”

Xie Lian didn’t know how to answer that. Jun Wu patted Xie Lian’s shoulder, then turned around. He was about to leave the Palace of Xianle when Xie Lian called to him.

“My Lord!”

Jun Wu paused in his step.

“Who exactly are you? Are you the Emperor? Or something else?” Xie Lian asked.

He’d struggled to accept it when he suspected a connection between the state preceptor and White No-Face. If Jun Wu and White No-Face were connected, his whole world would flip upside down. After all, Jun Wu was the number one martial god of the three realms, someone he respected and looked up to!

Jun Wu didn’t answer him, just continued on his way. Now that Xie Lian was left to his own devices, he brainstormed plans for retaliation as he dragged his exhausted body to the inner chambers of the Palace of Xianle.

Although this palace had become a cage, it was a magnificent cage. There was even a bathing pool made of white jade in the inner hall. Over the last few days, Xie Lian had battled the white ghost, entered the Kiln, crawled, tumbled, rolled, and fought. He was exhausted in both body and mind. He decided that he might as well take a bath to refresh himself—he wouldn't be going anywhere for a while anyway.

He stripped down and lowered himself into the warm water to soak. Xie Lian leaned against the edge of the white jade pool, folding his clothes absentmindedly. Two tiny things came tumbling out of his pile of robes, clacking crisply as they did. Xie Lian looked closely and saw that they were two cute, exquisite little dice.

He picked up the dice and held them in his palm, remembering the words Hua Cheng had said to him: *"If you want to see me, it won't matter what you roll. I will appear."*

It was unusual that he was the one who initiated their spiritual communication, and perhaps Hua Cheng had noticed. But even if he realized something was wrong, he wouldn't be able to get here—the Heavenly Capital was now isolated from the world and completely under Jun Wu's control.

Xie Lian was fully aware of the reality of the situation. He knew he wouldn't get to see Hua Cheng, even if he rolled two sixes. But he still tried.

Clack, clack. The dice tumbled over the jade tiles on the edge of the bathing pool.

Snake eyes—his luck was terrible as always. And sure enough, there was not a single hint of movement.

Xie Lian sighed and turned around. He was just about to dunk his face and body into the water when he heard a voice.

“Gege.”

Water splashed everywhere as Xie Lian abruptly stood up in the bath. “San Lang?”

Had he actually summoned Hua Cheng?!

However, when he scanned his surroundings, he didn’t see anyone’s shadow. Still, that voice was definitely not a hopeful hallucination. Xie Lian’s heart thumped when he heard another voice call out.

“Your Highness!”

“…”

Only then did Xie Lian realize that the voice had come from his own mouth! It was his voice, but the sound had been obscured by the spacious bathing room’s humid air and the noise of splashing water. Xie Lian was stunned for a moment, but then it dawned on him: the Soul-Shifting Spell!

“Lord Wind Master?!” he cried in surprise and delight.

From his lips came another person’s overly excited words. “Yes, it’s me! Ha ha ha ha, amazing, right? The Wind Master—no, *I* have spiritual powers again!”

It was previously mentioned that the Soul-Shifting Spell didn’t see frequent use due to its exhaustive demands on spiritual power. Because it was much rarer and sketchier than typical spiritual communication spells, a random barrier was unlikely to deliberately block it. When Shi Qingxuan lost his spiritual powers, the door that connected him to Xie Lian had been blocked from one side. Xie Lian hadn't imagined that door would see use now.

"Qingxuan, the Soul-Shifting Spell burns a lot of spiritual power. Where did you get it?" Xie Lian asked, though he quickly realized the answer. Where *else* could he have gotten it?

Sure enough, Shi Qingxuan replied, "It's a long story! Uh, well, it's not actually that long. That Crimson Rain Sought Flower of yours gave me a few black candies to eat; they're incredibly magical! I got an explosion of power after I ate them! Even though it's temporary, it'll still last for a while. Communication won't be a problem. But they taste really bad, *blech, blech, blech*!"

"…"

Xie Lian couldn't help but recall the Ghost Scent Candy that Pei Ming had eaten. But any spiritual power candies Hua Cheng provided would be high-end.

"Who called me gege just now?" Xie Lian asked.

"It was me!" Shi Qingxuan said.

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Why did you call me that? And here I thought—"

"I know," Shi Qingxuan said. "You thought it was Crimson Rain Sought Flower coming for you, right?"

Xie Lian cleared his throat lightly, and Shi Qingxuan continued, "He was the one who told me to call you that. He said that you'd know he was here if I did, and it'd be comforting for you."

That was true, Xie Lian supposed. Although he had been surprised when he heard “gege,” it had been very reassuring.

“Is he next to you right now?” Xie Lian asked. “Is everything all right in the royal capital? The vengeful spirits aren’t giving you trouble, are they?”

“Everything’s fine here,” Shi Qingxuan said. “The vengeful spirits are still being cleared out. It’s just that, when you were having that conversation with Crimson Rain Sought Flower earlier, he was happily laughing and talking with you about random stuff, then, as soon as the communication ended, his face turned so dark it was terrifying. And then he called me over to see if I could shift my soul to you. Oh yeah—by the way, Your Highness, he wants me to pass on this message: ‘Your Highness, please get dressed.’ He’s been nagging me about that for a while now. What’s the problem? It’s not like you’ll catch a cold in the heavens.”

Xie Lian nearly fainted, and he grabbed a robe to wrap around himself at the speed of lightning. “H-h-h-he… San Lang can see?!”

“Yeah,” Shi Qingxuan replied. “It’s pretty annoying to keep repeating things, so I’ve just been transmitting everything I see and hear right to him. That way he knows everything you do or say. He just can’t talk to you or control your body directly, that’s all.”

Dear Lord Wind Master…how clueless *can you be?!* Had Xie Lian known, he wouldn’t have gotten into the bath! He’d assumed that he would have to think a while longer before an opportunity presented itself!

“It’s fine, Your Highness,” Shi Qingxuan said. “I didn’t think you’d care so much about something like this. We’re all men here—surely you’ve seen Hua-chengzhu like that before? Besides, I didn’t see much…”

He really was too clueless. Xie Lian slapped a hand to his forehead and quickly got dressed, then abruptly changed the subject as he grabbed the dice and left the inner hall.

"San Lang, how did you figure out that something was wrong?"

After a pause, Shi Qingxuan replied, "Crimson Rain Sought Flower says he knew the moment you sought him out. Oh, Hua-chengzhu wants me to tell you this: 'Gege is so shy, I knew he wouldn't recite my verbal password if it wasn't something major.'"

"…"

Just as he'd thought.

Shi Qingxuan seemed to be talking to Hua Cheng. "Okay, okay, okay, I won't waste any more time on nonsense, we'll talk business." Then he said, "Your Highness, what exactly is the situation over there? Is the Emperor not around?"

Xie Lian didn't know where to start. "It's precisely because he's around that things are like this!"

By the time Xie Lian had explained the key points, Shi Qingxuan was already shaken.

"My god, my god, my god! Your Highness, you're not delirious, are you?! It's the Emperor! We're talking about the Emperor here!"

"I can't be sure if it really *is* him anymore," Xie Lian said. "San Lang, what do you make of all this?"

A moment later, Shi Qingxuan replied, "Crimson Rain Sought Flower doesn't seem very shocked. He just said, 'Not surprised at all. I already couldn't stand him.'"

For lack of anything to say to that, Xie Lian laughed. “Can you stand anyone?”

That question was directed to Hua Cheng, and Shi Qingxuan replied, “He says, ‘Other than you, no.’ Hey, Hua-chengzhu, that’s not very nice. I’m standing right here, ya know! So you can’t stand me either?! What’s wrong with me?!”

“All right, all right, it was just a joke. In any case, the martial gods have all been beaten into submission, and every heavenly official is confined to their palace. The Heavenly Capital is isolated from the world right now, so there’s no way to get in.”

“Crimson Rain Sought Flower says there is a way in, but we’ll need to enlist someone’s help,” Shi Qingxuan stated.

“Who?” Xie Lian asked, but a moment later, he shouted, “Who’s there?!”

The latter question wasn’t directed at Hua Cheng or Shi Qingxuan—it was voiced at an unusual movement behind him.

Someone had come!

Chapter 113:
Forks in the Road, Spirits Alarm the Underground of the Heavenly Capital

RUOYE HAD ALREADY UNWRAPPED itself from his wrist and was waiting at the ready, but it calmed and retreated after Xie Lian saw who had come.

“You… Yin Yu?” Xie Lian said.

A giant hole had appeared in the room, big enough for two people. Poking halfway out of the hole was Yin Yu with a sharp shovel in his hands. He huffed a breath and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Your Highness, it’s me. Thank goodness I didn’t dig in the wrong spot. Let’s get out of here!”

He had forgotten there was a holy spiritual device in Yin Yu’s possession—the Earth Master Shovel! It was a blessing from the heavens that the device hadn’t been confiscated! Apparently, not having much presence could be a good thing sometimes. Enemies wouldn’t target him in the chaos of battle…though of course, his fellow soldiers might injure him by accident.

Just as Xie Lian was about to go over and help pull Yin Yu out of the hole, his feet involuntarily took a step back.

Yin Yu was puzzled. “Your Highness? What is it?”

Xie Lian was confused as well. Why would he back away? But soon he realized that *he* wasn’t the one backing away—it was Shi Qingxuan, who was still a guest in his body. The Earth Master Shovel was very familiar, and it was hard not to think of the ones who had used it in the past. An inexplicable wave of terror filled Xie Lian—that was probably Shi Qingxuan's subconscious reaction. Fortunately, the reaction wasn't too extreme, and he quickly managed to return the body's control to Xie Lian.

Completely forgetting to ask Hua Cheng about whose help they would have to enlist to ascend to the heavens, Xie Lian rushed to jump into the hole with Yin Yu and dropped into the Heavenly Capital's underground.

The hole above them was quickly closed. As they crawled down the dark tunnel for a short stretch, a thought struck Xie Lian.

"Yin Yu, can the Earth Master Shovel dig through the barrier sealing off the Heavenly Capital?"

"I…don't think so?" Yin Yu replied.

"Huh?"

"Although that shovel is a spiritual device, you'll still be stuck in the Heavenly Capital no matter how much you dig," Shi Qingxuan explained. "Doesn't that mean it's useless?"

Yin Yu scratched his head. "It's not entirely useless… Barrier arrays have been set up outside every martial heavenly official's palace to stop their injuries from healing quickly; they probably won't recover their fighting power for years if they remain confined. So I thought, why not use the Earth Master Shovel to dig out a secret room in the underground somewhere, then move all the martial gods there—we can try to break out after everyone's mostly recovered."

"Wait!" Shi Qingxuan called out. "Hua-chengzhu says that you should tell those usel—those martial gods to just hide and heal—you'll be seeking your own deaths if you try to break out under Jun Wu's watch."

Yin Yu was shocked. “Your Highness, you…can communicate with Chengzhu? I thought that was impossible.”

“No, no, no,” Xie Lian said. “The one talking to you just now wasn’t me.”

“It’s me! It’s me, Your Highness Yin Yu!” Shi Qingxuan said.

But no matter how they spoke, the words were coming from one mouth, and Yin Yu was confused. “It’s not you, but it’s you. Doesn’t that make it *you*, Your Highness?”

“Gah, it’s me, *me*, the Wind Master! Wait, now you should call me the Former Wind Master. I’m using the Soul-Shifting Spell.” Shi Qingxuan sighed. “Relaying messages is such a pain.”

Shi Qingxuan kept entering his body to listen and watch, then returning to his own body to relay everything to Hua Cheng, going back and forth, over and over—just thinking about it was tiresome.

“Oh, oh, that sounds like such hard work. So that’s what was happening!” Yin Yu quickly replied before he returned to digging with renewed vigor. The two crept forward for a while before Yin Yu spoke again. “Here…should be good! Your Highness, please remain hidden for now. I’ll go pick up the next heavenly official.”

The tunnel they had entered at the beginning was gradually closing, and Xie Lian said, “Huh? By yourself? I’ll go with you.”

“No, it’s all right,” Yin Yu said. “Truth be told, Your Highness, the larger the hole, the more power the Earth Master Shovel uses. It’ll probably be faster if I go alone. The closest martial god palace to here is…” He thought for a moment before continuing, “In any case, I’ll be right back.”

Shi Qingxuan had used the Soul-Shifting Spell so many times, and the exhaustion from the immense drain of spiritual power was affecting Xie Lian. He sat on the ground, nodding tiredly, his head and body heavy. He propped up his head with one hand.

“All right…”

Yin Yu opened a new hole and dug onward while Xie Lian lay on the ground and closed his eyes.

Some time later, he jolted awake.

“Yin Yu?”

It was pitch-black all around him, and deathly silent. Yin Yu still hadn’t returned.

“Your Highness, you’re awake? You must be tired. Yin Yu hasn’t gotten back yet,” Shi Qingxuan verified.

The short rest had replenished Xie Lian’s energy. “How long has he been gone? Why hasn’t he returned?”

“It’s been almost two incense time,” Shi Qingxuan said. “He couldn’t have gotten lost, could he?”

Xie Lian sensed that something was wrong. “I’ll go look for him.”

He rolled over and crawled toward the tunnel through which Yin Yu had left. Since Yin Yu still needed to use this tunnel to return, it hadn’t automatically filled itself in after the Earth Master Shovel burrowed through. As Xie Lian made his careful way forward, Shi Qingxuan spoke.

“Crimson Rain Sought Flower says, ‘Gege, you shouldn’t go.’”

Xie Lian stopped moving. “Something’s probably not right, I suspect?”

“Yeah,” Shi Qingxuan replied. “Hua-chengzhu’s tone sounded pretty serious.”

“But it’s precisely because it doesn’t seem right that I have to go find him,” Xie Lian said. “If Yin Yu ran into trouble—”

A chill ran down his spine. Startled, Xie Lian whipped his head around.

Shi Qingxuan also sensed the chill and exclaimed, “My god, what was that? That sudden shudder!”

There was only the empty, pitch-black tunnel behind him and nothing more. However, Xie Lian stared at it for a long while before he replied, “It’s nothing.”

Shi Qingxuan instantly shut his mouth and held his breath, because right after Xie Lian said the words “It’s nothing” out loud, he then soundlessly mouthed, *“Don’t make a sound—something’s here!”*

Someone else was in the tunnel. They had been right behind Xie Lian but disappeared the moment he looked back.

Xie Lian’s gut instinct for danger was never wrong. He couldn’t allow the one behind him to know he had already noticed them, so he pretended he’d sensed nothing amiss.

Shi Qingxuan hated situations like these more than anything, and goosebumps rose across his arms.

“Is it His Highness Yin Yu?” Shi Qingxuan mouthed back.

Yin Yu wouldn’t need to sneak around. After a moment’s silence, Xie Lian asked soundlessly, *“Has San Lang said anything?”*

"Uhh, umm, that San Lang of yours looks really scary right now…" Shi Qingxuan replied. *"He says, 'Gege, if the situation calls for it, use the Soul-Shifting Spell to move into the Wind Master's body.'"*

Never mind that he didn't have enough spiritual power right now to use the Soul-Shifting Spell; even if he had plenty, Xie Lian couldn't possibly just up and leave all by himself, abandoning the mess in the Heavenly Capital.

"Don't worry, San Lang," Xie Lian replied.

He hadn't even specified what not to worry about when his head shot up. Something was coming from ahead!

The first sense of danger had come from behind, but now it was in front of him. It was still pitch-black when he looked; he couldn't see anything.

"Your Highness, what did you notice now?" Shi Qingxuan mouthed. *"What should we do? Does this mean we should go forward or back?"*

For a moment, he strained his senses. Then, Xie Lian replied, *"It means forward or back makes no difference, so who cares?"*

He crawled forward. He crawled and crawled until he suddenly stopped in surprise.

"How can this be?" Shi Qingxuan said despite himself.

A fork in the road stood before them. There were two tunnels!

"Um… Could Yin Yu have dug a path and discovered he was going the wrong way, so he dug another one?" Shi Qingxuan wondered.

Yin Yu must be very familiar with the Heavenly Capital's layout. How could he make a mistake like that? Xie Lian thought. *This is probably* *something worse.*

He didn't say this out loud, though. He only said, "Qingxuan, can you help me ask San Lang to pick a path? Left or right?"

A moment later, Shi Qingxuan said, "Crimson Rain Sought Flower says…he doesn't recommend either one. 'Don't pick either.'"

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. While he figured there was probably something bad waiting for him at the end of both paths, he couldn't just stay where he was.

After some contemplation, he said, "Qingxuan, you pick one."

"Huh? Me?" Shi Qingxuan asked.

"Yeah. If you pick, there's still a fifty percent chance you'll pick the better route. If I pick, then…"

"All right, I get it."

He struggled with this internal dilemma for a moment, then turned his head to the left. Xie Lian nodded and crawled over.

The deeper they crawled, the narrower the tunnel became; it was almost suffocating but still passable. They turned and wound and crawled for a long while before the burrow opened into a much larger space. Thankfully, although they remained on high alert the entire way, they hadn't run into any real danger. Xie Lian examined their surroundings for a moment.

"What is this place?"

"I don't know, I can't see clearly," Shi Qingxuan said, uncertain. "But why does it feel a little familiar—huh?!"

He wasn't the only one who noticed; Xie Lian had as well.

It was very familiar—wasn’t this the secret room where Xie Lian had slept awaiting Yin Yu’s return? He was certain. There was another tunnel in the chamber—it was the one Yin Yu had dug with the Earth Master Shovel when he left, the same one Xie Lian had used to go find him!

Shi Qingxuan shuddered. “How did we end up back here? Was there… Was this path here before?!”

Of course not! There was only one tunnel leading out when they left. The path they used to return had appeared from nowhere. When they ran into that fork in the road, the left path detoured in a big circle and brought them back to the start!

Yin Yu couldn’t have dug this—he wouldn’t have wasted so much effort to secretly do something this pointless. He had probably encountered this bizarre detour as well. Xie Lian knew he should’ve gone with him. Without another word, he crawled into the tunnel he had initially used to leave and quickly came to the fork in the road once more. This time, he chose the path on the right. As he crawled, Shi Qingxuan spoke.

“I think… It looks like my luck wasn’t that great this time. I picked the wrong path. I should’ve chosen the right fork from the beginning!”

“No, I think your luck is still really good,” Xie Lian said.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

Xie Lian tried to word this delicately. “Hmm, how do I put this… The path on the right might be even scarier than the one on the left.”

Then, they heard it. From behind came the scratching sounds of something rapidly closing in on their position.

Xie Lian unwrapped Ruoye and threw it behind him. “Ruoye! Help block it for a moment!”

He started madly crawling forward, almost three meters per push. Shi Qingxuan was losing his mind in panic.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha, how exciting, exciting! Excitingexcitingexciting!”

“The most exciting part hasn’t come yet!” Xie Lian called out. “Come! Take a look—!”

“What’s that now?!” Shi Qingxuan exclaimed.

Xie Lian stopped his frantic crawling and gave a long exhale. Before them was another fork in the road!

“Right!” Shi Qingxuan cried without thinking.

Xie Lian turned right resolutely and kept crawling, but endless forks in the road presented themselves.

“Left! Right! Left! Right!” Shi Qingxuan cried.

He no longer even knew what he was yelling. Under such dire circumstances, with the situation changing at a moment’s notice, he couldn’t leave Xie Lian’s body to ask Hua Cheng for advice—the situation might change completely on the next turn. The thing behind them had been blocked by Ruoye for a little while, but it was still closing in on them. The tunnels were also growing narrower and narrower, tighter and tighter. Finally, they reached the point where they couldn’t move their arms at all!

“I can’t crawl any further!” Xie Lian exclaimed, his shoulders already stuck.

“Then what should we do?” Shi Qingxuan cried. “Do we have to backtrack?!”

The thing pursuing them was going to catch up any second!

"No fear!" Xie Lian exclaimed. "A man can both charge and withdraw; when moving forward is impossible, we'll take a step back! If that's our only option, then so be it! Come on!"

He took two steps backward, freeing a hand in the process. He was just about to grab for Fangxin and fight the thing behind him to his heart's content when a sudden chill ran through his body. Xie Lian's heart sank to the pit of his stomach. When he looked up, someone chuckled in the darkness—though he couldn't see who it was. A hand reached out and settled on Xie Lian's head. His eyes went wide, and the next moment, he lost consciousness.

Some time later, Xie Lian slowly came to.

Upon regaining consciousness, Xie Lian found himself sitting on a chair. His entire body was firmly and securely bound. As he struggled a bit, he discovered it was Ruoye that was binding him.

Xie Lian was perplexed. "Ruoye, what are you doing?"

Ruoye was clearly distressed, and it drooped, nuzzling him. Xie Lian looked closer and discovered that Ruoye had been tied into a series of complicated snarls. No wonder it couldn't fight back; being tied into knots like this was its greatest fear. Before it had grown wiser, it used to like to mindlessly wind around in play, and it'd invariably tangle itself into a mess of complicated knots as it did. Every time, Xie Lian would exasperatedly work the knots loose. It became smarter in time and learned to behave itself, and never knotted itself up again.

Feeling helpless, Xie Lian tried to see if he could break the chair apart instead, but unfortunately, it wouldn't move at all. It seemed to be affixed to the floor by extremely strong spiritual power.

Since he couldn't move, he decided to simply observe his surroundings. Xie Lian scanned the room. He was likely inside a palace—and a rather new and glamorous one at that—but he didn't know which one. In any case, it wasn't the Palace of Divine Might.

His thoughts were interrupted by a hand suddenly settling on his shoulder. A gentle voice came from over his head.

"Xianle, my dear Xianle. You really are too naughty."

Chills spiked up Xie Lian's spine at the sound of that voice. A man with one hand resting behind his back stepped forward from where he stood behind the chair. Jun Wu.

His other hand remained on Xie Lian's shoulder, and as he walked into view, he continued to speak.

"In the six months since your return, the Heavenly Capital has been smashed and broken, wrecked all over. You are quite naughty indeed, wouldn't you say? What were you doing, sneaking and scurrying about underground? Are you a little mouse? Was it fun?"

He spoke with a kind, gentle voice, like a father watching his beloved child mess around. Xie Lian found it intensely creepy and unnerving, and he had no idea how to respond. He felt a sudden gust of cold at his feet, and when he looked down, he saw a bundle of something white hugging his boots and watching him with a fiercely malicious stare—the fetus spirit.

Xie Lian lifted his gaze. He had pretty much figured out what had happened. Yin Yu was captured by Jun Wu while digging around with the Earth Master shovel. Jun Wu had then sent some things to stop Xie Lian underground, which was why he had gone through that terrifying experience.

After a moment struck speechless, Xie Lian finally knew what to say. "…You have such awful hobbies."

That chase in the tunnels reminded him of the days he spent consumed by panic and anxiety due to White No-Face's suffocating pursuit. If Jun Wu had wanted to capture him, he should have just done it—why terrorize him like that?

However, Jun Wu seemed quite cheerful, and he smiled. "But Xianle is now much braver than before."

Xie Lian couldn't continue that line of conversation. Instead, he asked, "Where's Yin Yu?"

Jun Wu placed his hands on the back of the chair and turned Xie Lian around. "There is no rush. You will see. And there's not just him."

He was now facing a mirror. However, he didn't see his own reflection—rather, it showed a pale-faced Yin Yu. By Yin Yu's feet lay an unconscious person, head soaked with blood and face black and blue. From the curly hair, Xie Lian could tell it was Quan Yizhen.

Xie Lian asked in alarm, "What are you up to?"

Chapter 114:
Unable to Be Perfect, a Heart Filled with Regrets

THE MIRROR REFLECTED what was transpiring on the other side of the wall.

Yin Yu shook Quan Yizhen vigorously. “Wake up, wake up…”

Quan Yizhen finally came to and mumbled blearily, “Shihong, who bea me uh jus now? Wha sih ya?”

Poor Qi Ying…he was so bruised up that he was slurring his speech. Xie Lian couldn’t help but feel sympathetic.

“Do you think *I* could’ve beaten you up…?” Yin Yu asked.

Quan Yizhen scratched his head, and only then did he seem to recall what had happened. “Oh, ih was the Emprer who bea me uh.” He suddenly remembered something else and his energy seemed to return. “He snach away your shovo! Do you wan me to hel snach ih back?”

“Do you really think you could beat him…?” Yin Yu asked.

Xie Lian finally figured it out—he was in the Palace of Qi Ying. It seemed Yin Yu had been captured by Jun Wu when he came to look for Quan Yizhen.

Jun Wu had circled back behind him, and Xie Lian used the chance to lower his head and mouth soundlessly, *“Lord Wind Master, are you still there?”*

However, it wasn’t Shi Qingxuan who responded.

“Of course not,” Jun Wu said.

"…"

"It suddenly occurred to me that there were some loopholes in the Heavenly Capital's barrier," Jun Wu explained. "I have only just barred the Soul-Shifting Spell."

"…"

Jun Wu patted his shoulder and said amicably, "And to think I was the one who taught you the Soul-Shifting Spell all those years ago. I am very pleased that Xianle has been making practical use of the things I taught him."

With that, Jun Wu left. Not long after, he appeared in the image in the mirror.

Quan Yizhen was the first to notice his arrival. "…!"

Yin Yu whirled around and called out in alarm, "My Lord?!"

Quan Yizhen jumped to his feet, ready to fight, but Jun Wu easily smacked him back onto the bed with a casual wave. The entire bed collapsed on impact, and Quan Yizhen fell to the ground, head lolling. He had lost consciousness again.

Yin Yu was fully on guard, but Jun Wu said to him, "No need to be so tense. Think of it this way—any attempt at defense would be a pointless effort, so why not relax?"

That was certainly true. Not knowing how to respond, Yin Yu gave the same awkward smile that he always had, though he quickly retracted the expression. Jun Wu, on the other hand, appeared relaxed and at ease.

"My dear Yin Yu, I do not think I have ever chatted with you like this before. Isn't that right?"

“I guess not…” Yin Yu replied cautiously.

Even back when he was the martial god who ruled the west, his base of believers wasn’t strong, his merits were few, and his rank wasn’t impressive. He wasn’t the lowest ranked of the heavenly officials in the Upper Court, but he was still below average, so he’d had almost no opportunities to interact with the Heavenly Emperor—the highest of the high. In the past, he probably would’ve been nervous if Jun Wu even passed by his palace’s entrance. Now, his anxiety had reached new heights.

“But there aren’t many heavenly officials who have spoken to me before, or know me,” Yin Yu added.

“That’s not necessarily true,” Jun Wu said. “There are many who know you, even if they’ve never met you before.”

“Really?” Yin Yu asked, surprised.

“Many know of your shidi. And when your shidi is mentioned, you are often an accompanying subject—as his foil,” Jun Wu replied.

Those were extremely hurtful words. Jun Wu gave a colorless description devoid of emotion, but that just made it sting more—it was the objective truth. Quan Yizhen was still dizzy, not yet back to his senses. Yin Yu hung his head low and clenched his fists.

Xie Lian could vaguely guess what Jun Wu was planning now.

It took a long time for Yin Yu to gather his courage. “My Lord, what do you want? You’re already the Heavenly Emperor, the number one martial god of the Three Realms. From heaven above to hell below, there is no one who could stand equal to you. So…why are you doing this? What exactly do you want?”

Of course, Jun Wu didn’t answer him.

“Yin Yu, do you want to return to the Upper Court?” he asked abruptly.

“What?!”

Xie Lian was also surprised by this question. What was Jun Wu planning? Why would he try to coax Yin Yu to change sides at a time like this?!

“Surely you do not actually like being a mere pawn in the Ghost Realm?”

Yin Yu finally snapped out of his shock. “…My Lord thinks too much. There’s nothing to like or dislike about it.”

Oh no! Xie Lian cried in his mind. *You can’t answer like that. Now he’ll find your weak point!*

Sure enough, Jun Wu smiled. “Did you know? An answer like that always means ‘I dislike it and would rather not talk about it.’”

“…”

It was true. If Yin Yu truly felt confident and actually liked his current position in the Ghost Realm, he would’ve easily responded, “I like it very much.” By avoiding giving an answer, his real feelings were made clear.

“You came from a renowned school, an orthodox sect that never traversed the deviant path. Growing up in that sect, you were always told that ascending was the ultimate thing to strive for,” Jun Wu continued. “It is very difficult to give up that sort of goal. Falling in with the Ghost Realm was an unfortunate circumstance, an act borne of helplessness. Of course you cannot say you are satisfied with your position in the Ghost Realm. It was never what you wanted in the first place.”

Yin Yu didn’t have enough confidence to deny it. He said weakly, “Chengzhu has shown me grace. He saved me—”

“I know,” Jun Wu said. “He even helped you pacify and send off Jian Yu’s vengeful spirit after he died during your banishment, am I correct?”

“…Yes,” Yin Yu confirmed. “So whether or not I’m satisfied with my current position, it’s all—”

“That *is* dissatisfaction,” Jun Wu noted. “You are bound by his grace and have nowhere else to go. You are in denial.”

Yin Yu hung his head and didn’t reply.

Xie Lian broke out in a cold sweat. He could guess how Jun Wu planned to attack, and Yin Yu was full of weakness from head to toe—in every expression, every gesture!

“Then let me ask you another question,” Jun Wu said. “Have you shown Quan Yizhen grace?”

“…”

“Why must you place yourself in an unsatisfactory position because someone showed you grace? Why must you devote yourself to repaying his kindness? When you showed Quan Yizhen grace, he made you fall this low,” Jun Wu continued. “Yin Yu, compromising yourself for another’s success is a bad habit. You must know that no one will thank you.”

With every step he cornered Yin Yu further and trampled the places he hurt most!

"You yearned for ascension your entire life. You wanted a good position in the Upper Court and to join the ranks inside the Palace of Divine Might," Jun Wu went on. "Even after Quan Yizhen made you an embarrassment—turned you into his background accessory, made you the laughingstock of the heavens—you endured it and struggled to keep your place in the Heavenly Capital. Was that not because you wanted to stay?

"You belong here. But Quan Yizhen made a mess of everything. He effortlessly stole all the things that should have been yours. Who does he think he is?

"Have you not sacrificed as much as him? No, you sacrificed far more than he ever has. And when it comes to overall ability, he might not even compare. Why is Qi Ying now alone in the Upper Court, with neither aid nor support? It is because his mind is simple—he is ignorant and foolish, blunt and savage, and incapable of earning anyone's respect. But you… *You* are far more mature. You know the ways of the world better than him. You know when to charge and when to withdraw, and you are always willing to put in the effort. Your achievements would be many, many times greater than his if you had his natural talent and spiritual power. All would respect you."

Yin Yu was growing restless. "I don't understand why My Lord is saying all this. What-ifs are meaningless; his spiritual powers are his own—" Suddenly, he cried out and raised his hand, then asked in alarm, "What?! What is this?!"

Dazzling spiritual light had burst from one of his hands, bright enough to blind any who looked at it directly.

Jun Wu was unmoved. “No need to be afraid. It is just a bit of spiritual power.”

Only then did Yin Yu calm down a little. He said in disbelief, “Whose spiritual power is this? Mine? I’m not this…”

His spiritual power wasn’t that strong.

“It is not yours yet,” Jun Wu said. “Whether it will become yours will depend on what you choose.”

“If it’s not mine, whose is it?!” Yin Yu exclaimed. “Could it be…”

Someone immediately came to mind, and he looked at Quan Yizhen. As stubborn and resilient as always, Quan Yizhen regained consciousness in that moment, though bewilderment was still plastered on his face. He was clearly confused again.

“Correct. This is Quan Yizhen’s spiritual power,” Jun Wu replied.

Quan Yizhen gaped. “Huh…?”

“Why are his spiritual powers inside me?” Yin Yu questioned. “How can spiritual power be transferred like this? How is this possible?!”

“Even fates can be swapped. Why not spiritual power?” Jun Wu said. “There are many things that are hardly as difficult as you assume. It is only a matter of a few words and a few brush strokes from a few great heavenly officials.”

Yin Yu shuddered. “This… This…!”

He shook his hands as if trying to toss away a scalding-hot potato. But the spiritual powers only sparked with joyful vigor on his hands, blasting wherever his fingers pointed. An entire set of walls inside the Palace of Qi Ying were blown apart in an instant, the divine statue collapsed, and the roof almost caved in. This shocked Yin Yu even further, and he didn’t dare randomly throw his hands around anymore.

“Do not be nervous,” said Jun Wu, smiling. “Take your time. Just keep it under control.”

Shaken and terrified, Yin Yu held one hand with the other. His arms trembled.

“Yin Yu, let me ask you again. Do you want to return?” Jun Wu asked.

Yin Yu heaved several breaths, his eyes bloodshot. He gazed at Jun Wu.

“If you want to return, not only can I remove your cursed shackle, I can also transfer all of Quan Yizhen’s spiritual power to you,” Jun Wu said.

Quan Yizhen just lay there, utterly stupefied—it seemed he had never even considered the existence of such an evil spell.

“Are you crazy?!” Xie Lian exclaimed.

“And from now on, there will never be another who only knows of Qi Ying but not of Yin Yu,” Jun Wu continued slowly. “For who would dare not remember your name? No one ever again.”

Yin Yu stumbled a few steps back, his mind a mess. “I… I… I…”

Xie Lian was so tense that he’d forgotten he was still tied to the chair by Ruoye. He held his breath, his hands gripping the chair as his body leaned forward.

There was one thing Jun Wu had gotten right, and Xie Lian could see it too. Deep down in Yin Yu’s heart, he preferred the heavens. He had belonged to the Upper Court all along. This feeling was planted deep within his mind, unchangeable.

And did Yin Yu really not harbor a single resentful thought toward Quan Yizhen? He couldn’t be sure.

So much had happened between them that it was impossible to say “I don’t hate you” so easily. The hatred he felt might be great or small, but Yin Yu was neither assertive nor self-possessed—his decisions were greatly influenced by those around him. Since they didn’t know each other well, Xie Lian couldn’t be sure what Yin Yu would do. He could only pray silently.

Your Highness Yin Yu…be careful!

“I… I…”

Yin Yu was frightened out of his wits, and for a long while, he sat on the floor with his face in his hands. Eventually, he looked up with cold, somber eyes. He stared at Quan Yizhen, who had been beaten so badly he looked like nothing more than a pile of trash.

And then he said in a low voice, “My Lord, can you really…give me all of his spiritual power?”

Xie Lian’s heart sank. Quan Yizhen gaped at Yin Yu with a wide-open mouth.

“Shixiong…?”

“Why don’t I give it to you now? Then you will see for yourself what I can do,” Jun Wu said.

Yin Yu still seemed concerned. “Then…could he steal it back? It’s his own spiritual power, after all, so if he wanted it back—”

“It is impossible for him to retrieve it unless you return it willingly. Or unless you die,” Jun Wu said.

“If his spiritual power is transferred to me, will Quan Yizhen…die?” Yin Yu asked doubtfully. “Or will something else happen…?”

Despite everything, he probably still didn’t want Quan Yizhen to die by his hand.

“Nothing will happen. The process will be a bit painful, that is all,” Jun Wu replied. “But who in this world has not suffered pain? How he is dealt with afterward, whether he lives or dies—that will be entirely up to you.”

“What about the other heavenly officials?” Yin Yu then asked. “So many in the Upper Court saw what happened at the Palace of Divine Might. If word got out—”

Jun Wu smiled. “So what if they know? They are mere ants who can be crushed with a single hand. Annihilate them all, bring up a new batch of heavenly officials, change your face and your name, make up a new background. Who would be the wiser?”

As he said this, his expression was nonchalant, like he was suggesting pouring a new cup of tea if the old one had gone cold. Nonchalant…and clearly speaking from experience.

Finally, Yin Yu asked, “In the new Upper Court, I… What…would my position be?”

“Ling Wen will be my left hand, and you shall be my right,” Jun Wu said. “There will be none above you besides me.”

Yin Yu gritted his teeth. Finally, he said, “Very well!” He continued darkly, “Pray My Lord remembers the promise he made to me today.

Now…”

He trailed off and turned his gaze on Quan Yizhen.

“As you wish,” Jun Wu replied.

The moment the words left his lips, Quan Yizhen began writhing; his face twisted, and he screamed. Blood flowed from every orifice as he clutched his head and rolled across the floor in agony. As for Yin Yu, his body suddenly began glowing with spiritual light. His entire face was shining. He swung a hand upward—and blew a giant hole through the ceiling of the Palace of Qi Ying!

Chunks of the golden palace roof tumbled to the ground with an enormous crash. Standing among the wreckage, Yin Yu bowed his head to look at his hands, clenching them into fists. Jun Wu looked like he was watching a small child playing with a new toy.

“How does it feel?”

It was a moment before Yin Yu replied, “…I’ve never had such strong powers before.”

Quan Yizhen was still howling on the floor. Yin Yu gazed at him with a complicated expression.

“My master once said that Quan Yizhen was someone born to ascend—that his abilities were a gift from the heavens. Is this what a heavenly gift feels like?”

“From now on, it is yours,” Jun Wu said.

Yin Yu slowly nodded. The next moment, he raised his hand and shot a blast from his palm.

The blast used all of Quan Yizhen's power, its strength terrifying. A white light erupted from the mirror. A moment later, Yin Yu drew a huge circle in the air with his right hand, then snatched it from the air and hurled it out to ensnare Jun Wu. Jun Wu frowned slightly as he looked at the circle of light around his feet, seeming wary of touching it. He watched as Yin Yu pulled at Quan Yizhen on the ground.

"Yin Yu," said Jun Wu, looking indifferent, "would you like to explain why you have gone back on our deal at the last moment?"

Yin Yu kept his back turned to him as he hoisted Quan Yizhen onto it. He didn't respond.

"What you are doing is certainly praiseworthy. Truly, a man of class," Jun Wu said. "However, is this what you actually want deep in your heart? You have endured and suffered this for hundreds of years—are you going to continue?"

Yin Yu still did not respond.

"Do you truly not hate the one you are saving right now? Or even if you do not hate him, are you not annoyed?"

Yin Yu finally couldn't take it anymore. He clenched his fists tight, cracking his knuckles, and whirled around.

"I *do* resent him! He *is* annoying! But so what?!"

Quan Yizhen was a flustered mess, and blood spewed from his nose and mouth as he tried to speak.

"Shixiong—"

"Shut *up*!" Yin Yu shouted, then turned to Jun Wu again. "My Lord… My… No, *not* My Lord! *You!* Why must you keep reminding me of that?! Why do you speak like you actually understand me?! Yes, I hate him! But so what?! He's given me so much trouble—can't I hate him for it?!"

Xie Lian had no words. At first sunken to the bottom of the valley, his heart was suddenly thrown into the skies once more. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and he almost fell over. What kind of messed-up logic was that?!

"But…" Yin Yu continued. "But I only… I only wanted to hate him. That doesn't mean I want to *hurt* him. What was all that about how things should have been mine? Nothing belongs to anyone at birth besides their own natural talent. I don't want someone else's possessions!"

Xie Lian's eyes lit up. "Well said!"

"I *do* want to return to the heavens, I *do* want to be ranked in the top ten!" Yin Yu continued. "But it's completely meaningless if I don't do it on my own! I'm unlucky, I accept that! If I'm not as powerful as him, at least I can admit it! Admitting that I can't compare isn't that hard!"

Such pride! In that instant, Xie Lian finally saw Yin Yu shine with the glorious valor of his long-ago youth.

"Waaah!" Quan Yizhen had burst into tears on Yin Yu's back. Blood mingled with tears and snot, and it all splattered onto Yin Yu's face.

Yin Yu broke down, shouting, "*Stop* that!"

Quan Yizhen sobbed and moaned, "Shixiong, I'm sorry!"

Yin Yu was at the end of his patience. "You don't need to apologize to me anymore either! No matter how much you say you're sorry, you won't understand. I've honestly had enough of you…"

Jun Wu sighed and rubbed his temple.

"Besides… Besides, I'm not completely useless either," Yin Yu added. "You said it yourself. He might not compare to me when it comes to overall ability. But I've got my own—"

A strange noise rang out. *Click*.

Jun Wu turned around with a casual sweep of his hand. "Exhilarating. You and Xianle must get along well."

What?

What happened?!

Still tied to the chair, Xie Lian's heart was pounding so hard it was going to jump out of his chest. What happened to Yin Yu?!

He had stopped talking, and his expression had turned odd. As for Jun Wu, he rested his hands behind his back and calmly strolled out of that seemingly powerful circle of light—it had not held him for a moment.

"I expected you to respond that way. That is why I did not remove your cursed shackle."

Cursed shackle?! There was indeed a cursed shackle on Yin Yu's arm! Xie Lian quickly looked over just as Yin Yu also raised his wrist. The cursed shackle had tightened drastically; it looked like it was going to snap Yin Yu's hand off. As for Yin Yu's arm, it had turned as pale as paper, and the whiteness was spreading upward.

The cursed shackle was draining his blood!

Xie Lian lunged forward. The chair fell over, leaving him and it in a heap on the floor. Now he couldn't even see the mirror. He struggled like mad, but it was useless. From the mirror, he could only hear a savage beating.

A long time later, a pair of white boots came into Xie Lian's field of view. It was Jun Wu, who had returned.

In his hand, there was a cursed shackle—it was so engorged with blood that it had turned a dark crimson color. It had to be taken from Yin Yu.

Jun Wu crouched and petted Xie Lian's head. "Go say goodbye to your little friend."

Ruoye was finally untied from the knots that bound it. Xie Lian crawled upright and threw a punch at Jun Wu's face. Of course, it didn't land, and he almost tripped over his own feet in the attempt, but he hadn't expected it to hit Jun Wu anyway—he was just venting his anger. He dashed madly to the palace hall.

Yin Yu was lying on the ground. He looked dried-up and shriveled, as white and thin as a paper doll. Even his cheeks were sallow. All the spiritual light on him was gone—it had been returned to the bruised and beaten Quan Yizhen, whose face was now completely unrecognizable. It seemed the spiritual power had returned to its rightful master.

Xie Lian rushed over to them. "Your Highness Yin Yu!"

Yin Yu blinked with sunken eyes. When he saw Xie Lian, he croaked, "Your Highness…"

Quan Yizhen was clinging to the floor, wailing at the top of his lungs and screaming to the heavens. "I'm sorry, shixiong! All I know is how to fight, but I can't beat him!"

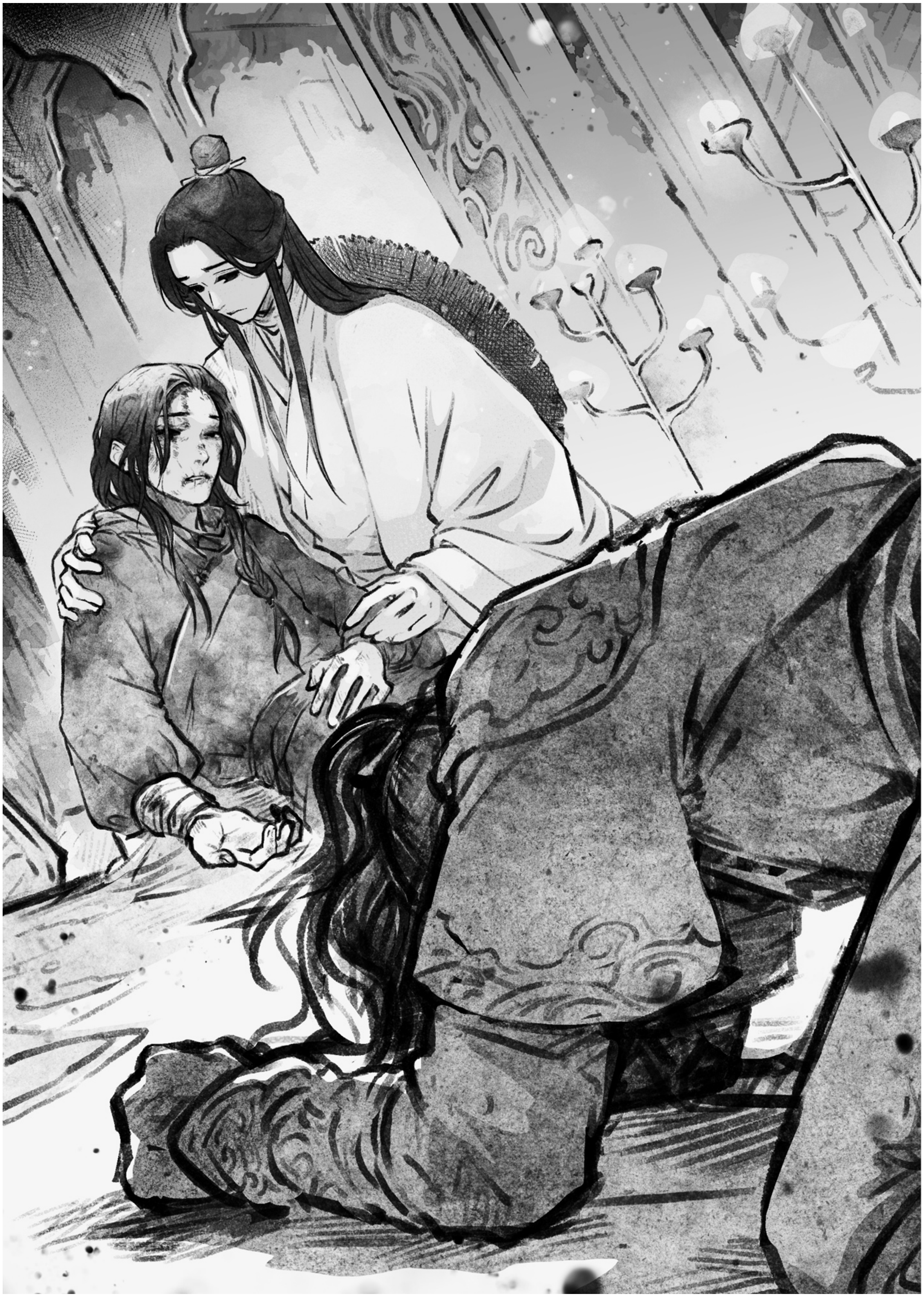
The blood from his mouth and nose splattered into Yin Yu's face again. Even the sight of it looked miserable. Veins popped on Yin Yu's forehead.

“I told you to stop that!” he shouted with the last bit of his energy. “Forget it… Just drive me to my death…”

His vigor gone once more, Yin Yu deflated. Xie Lian couldn’t tell if he had wanted to sigh, shed silent tears, or smile despite himself.

All of a sudden, tears welled up in Yin Yu’s dry eyes. “I knew,” he whispered. “Yizhen is a genius, but I’m just ordinary. I could only climb so high. I knew that.”

The pain of powerlessness seized Xie Lian’s heart.



“Even though I knew, I couldn’t accept it,” Yin Yu said. “In truth, I felt the same as Jian Yu—I was even more frustrated than he was. It’s not that I wasn’t resentful; it was impossible to be otherwise. After that incident, I could never bring myself to reflect on why I told Yizhen to die when I knew he was wearing the Brocade Immortal. Was I really just driven to madness, or did I actually want him dead?”

Xie Lian held him. “It’s all right… It’s over. Those are all small matters, really. Your Highness Yin Yu, if you live in this world for another few hundred years, you’ll know that none of that really matters. Whether you were driven to madness or really wished someone would die—who in the world has never had such thoughts? I once even thought of massacring everyone who ever wronged me; it’s true, and no lie, I almost did it. But look at me—I’m still here, shamelessly going on living. In the end, you didn’t actually do anything, and that’s what’s most important.”

“But in the end, I…still think…it’s so unfair,” Yin Yu sobbed. “If I wasn’t destined to be perfect, I at least wanted to be perfectly kind. But…I couldn’t even manage that. It’s really…so unfair. And to tell you the truth, I can’t get over it, even now. I just can’t swallow the fact that I’m dying for this little bonehead, Yizhen. I can’t even let go and die without resentment or regrets. What the heck…?”

“Your Highness, you’ve already worked so hard,” Xie Lian comforted him softly, “and you’ve done very well. You’re already much, much better than most people.”

“Better than most people, huh?” Yin Yu gave a small, arduous chuckle. Then he sighed, and the sound of his last regret passed along with his soul as he mumbled, “But I wanted to be a god…”

Xie Lian bowed his head deeply. “Your Highness Yin Yu…this world has no true gods…”

Chapter 115:
Breaking the Standstill, a Well-Timed Gift

IT SUDDENLY CLICKED in Xie Lian's head. He put Yin Yu down and rose to his feet.

"The cursed shackle… He took the cursed shackle!"

If it wasn't important, Jun Wu wouldn't have taken it, and he had gone out of his way to remove the swollen, blood-filled cursed shackle and bring it with him. Perhaps that thing hadn't just drained Yin Yu's blood—perhaps it had imprisoned his soul!

Realizing this, Xie Lian left the beaten, bruised Quan Yizhen behind and dashed to the back of the Palace of Qi Ying. But Jun Wu was no longer there. Xie Lian turned around and charged outside.

The great avenue of the Heavenly Capital was cold and deserted, not a soul to be seen besides the expressionless guards standing watch over the once-bustling great palaces of the gods. None of those guards cared about him, and Xie Lian didn't care about them either as he ran straight for the Palace of Divine Might.

Sure enough, Jun Wu had returned here. He was seated upon the throne, gazing at Yin Yu's cursed shackle. The moment Xie Lian charged inside, he heard a strange growling noise. When he looked up, he saw the fetus spirit clinging to the magnificent ceiling with all four limbs. It was scuttling around upside down like some cold-blooded creature, an incredibly disturbing sight.

Even that wicked creature could now enter the Palace of Divine Might. It truly made one wonder—what would the heavenly officials who had struggled and failed for centuries to step into this hall think if they saw?

Xie Lian marched over to the throne with one arm at the ready.

"What do you need?" Jun Wu asked.

Without another word, Xie Lian thrust out his hand to grab for the cursed shackle, but of course Jun Wu would not let him have his way.

After failing for a while to seize the shackle, Xie Lian cried out angrily, "What use do you have for it? Yin Yu isn't even a threat to you; he's completely insignificant in your eyes! Why did you say all that to him? What's the use in keeping that thing?!"

"Who says it's of no use?" Jun Wu replied. "It has made you this angry—does that not prove it is actually very useful?"

He was like an adult who had placed a bowl of fruit on the table just out of reach of his child—smiling cheerfully as he watched the child get up on tiptoe and grab for the bowl fruitlessly again and again, enjoying the child's anger and desperation and loud wailing.

Xie Lian was going to go mad from fury. "Are you insane?!"

"Xianle, that tone is rather disrespectful," Jun Wu said.

Able to endure this no longer, Xie Lian cursed aloud. "I'll show you some freaking respect—"

He began to swear; every curse he'd uttered up to this point should have been aimed at the man before him. But his tirade was interrupted when his throat constricted and he began to suffocate!

Xie Lian’s vision went black. He clutched at his throat, his knees buckled, and he dropped to the floor to kneel at Jun Wu’s feet. Jun Wu remained seated, petting the fetus spirit with calm composure; his hand brushed through its sparse hair and caressed its smooth, round head. The fetus spirit seemed to be enjoying the treatment and cooed with strange cheer while dark energy oozed from its palms.

Jun Wu gazed at Xie Lian’s flustered face as he listened to his violent coughing.

“Xianle, I suggest you behave as you did before—a little more obedient, a little more respectful. That is the only way to avoid my anger. Do not forget, you are wearing one of these too—in fact, you are wearing two of them.”

Xie Lian’s words were stolen by another fit of coughing. “Y-you…!”

He shot to his feet and glared at Jun Wu with red-rimmed eyes.

“I *what*? Am I despicable?” Jun Wu asked. “Xianle, do not forget that *you* were the one who asked for them.”

What a joke! How could he have known what the hell they really were back then?!

But it made him wonder… When the state preceptor saw him in the capital, when his face fell and he lunged at Xie Lian’s neck, was he really trying to kill him? Or had he been trying to remove his shackle?

It was a long time before the cursed shackle on Xie Lian’s neck finally loosened and let him breathe normally again. He gasped harshly, one hand reaching up automatically to the cursed shackle. But as he felt his neck, Xie Lian’s fingers found something else.

It was a very thin silver chain. The metal had once been cold, but his body had long since warmed it through—he'd been wearing it for so long now, after all. And hanging on that silver chain was a crystal-clear ring.

Xie Lian's shoulders immediately stiffened, and he gripped the ring tight. For some reason, his heart was pounding faster and faster as if he had learned an incredible secret.

Behind him, he heard Jun Wu speak. "It is I. What is it?"

What? What did he mean? Xie Lian stuffed the silver chain back into his robes and turned around with a frown, only to discover that Jun Wu's comment wasn't directed at him.

Jun Wu had two fingers raised and pressed against his temple. That posture—he was communicating with someone! Although he wasn't allowing any other heavenly officials in the Heavenly Capital to communicate via the spiritual array, those restrictions did not apply to him, and he could use it as he wished.

After a pause, Jun Wu continued, "It is nothing. Since the recent incident with the impersonated Earth Master, we have unearthed many of the spies and false personalities he planted within the Heavenly Capital. Considering all that has happened recently, we cannot afford any careless mistakes. All heavenly officials are being investigated, and the entire Heavenly Capital has been locked down. It is currently not open to the outside, nor is spiritual communication permitted, which is, of course, why you are unable to connect with anyone."

Xie Lian panted lightly, then held his breath. It sounded like the one speaking with Jun Wu didn't know the situation in the Heavenly Capital, so he was lying to them as if everything was fine. And the excuse he used was perfectly appropriate—the aftershocks of the discovery of Black Water's impersonation had rippled through the heavens leaving an enormous mess in their wake, and it made sense to take cleaning it up very seriously. It was reasonable for the entire court to be locked down on those grounds.

Even if Xie Lian screamed and yelled, the person on the other end wouldn't be able to hear him, so he decided to watch and wait. After a while, a barely perceptible change flashed across Jun Wu's face.

"Oh? You wish to come to the Heavenly Capital? Of course," he replied warmly. "The case this time is certainly important. You are most welcome if you have the heart to lend assistance."

The other party had actually volunteered to come help in the Heavenly Capital?! It would have been far more helpful if they'd offered several hours earlier, when everyone was definitely in need of aid. But this timing? The entire Heavenly Capital had already fallen and become a lair of demons. They might as well jump into a firepit!

Jun Wu said a few more simple words and ended the communication.

Straightaway, Xie Lian questioned him. "Who's coming?"

The fetus spirit seemed to know that it was not a creature of light, so it quietly crawled away to hide in the shadows. Jun Wu, on the other hand, only smiled.

"Such impatience. You will see soon enough."

He hadn't expected that. "You're going to let me see them?" Xie Lian asked incredulously. "Didn't you tell them that the entire Heavenly Capital is locked down and every heavenly official is being investigated?"

"Of course," Jun Wu replied. "But I should at least have a trustworthy left and right hand."

Ling Wen was technically still on the run, so she couldn't play the role publicly; thus, the task fell to Xie Lian.

Jun Wu studied him thoughtfully for a moment, then said gently, "Xianle, just be good and cooperate. Do not bother with any silly tricks. I know you too well. I know everything that is on your mind."

"…"

Jun Wu played absentmindedly with the blood-filled cursed shackle. "You said it yourself—Yin Yu was completely insignificant to me. Rather, *all* heavenly officials, no matter how grand, are insignificant in my eyes. You understand what will happen if you expose anything."

"…"

"So do not give anything away. Tidy yourself up—they will be here soon."

Xie Lian didn't speak, but he did pick himself up off the floor, dust himself off, and tidy himself up. He walked over to stand at Jun Wu's side, just as he always had.

Jun Wu approved of this. "Just like that."

While Jun Wu's threats were very effective, Xie Lian also noticed something—Jun Wu didn't seem to want whoever was coming to realize that the Heavenly Capital had fallen. This made Xie Lian even more curious who it was!

Two incense time later, several figures finally appeared before the Palace of Divine Might. There was a lady cultivator in green robes riding a burly black ox. A sword hung at her waist. She approached languidly with several farmers of all shapes and sizes in tow.

The Rain Master had come!

Xie Lian was surprised. Based on how Jun Wu had been acting—or rather, the way he acted when his true motives were exposed—he would kill whoever stood in his way. He should've locked up anyone who approached the capital. So why was he treating the Rain Master so carefully?

But there was no way to know the answer to that now. The Rain Master dipped her head toward them as she entered the Palace of Divine Might.

"Your Royal Highness. My Lord. How do you do?"

Xie Lian pretended everything was fine and returned the greeting. "Lord Rain Master."

He seemed polite and unfazed, but underneath, his mind was spinning. How could he communicate the real situation at the Heavenly Capital to the Rain Master?

"It has been a long time since Rain Master last visited the Heavenly Court," Jun Wu commented.

"The lockdown of the Heavenly Capital is rigorous," The Rain Master commented.

She sounded puzzled, and Jun Wu replied, "Considering the progression of the Black Water case, it is necessary. Over fifty fake heavenly officials have already been plucked from the Middle Court. It will be deeply troubling if there are yet more pawns planted in the Upper Court."

"I see," the Rain Master said.

The three of them chatted idly for a bit. That was when Xie Lian noticed that Jun Wu always covered for himself perfectly whether he spoke truths or lies, without a single flaw to be found—it was genuinely amazing. Xie Lian wanted to warn Rain Master, but he was afraid Jun Wu would notice and take it out on the other heavenly officials. He was also afraid to involve the Rain Master herself, who had no idea what was going on. His hands were tied.

The Rain Master didn't seem to notice that anything was unusual. She asked if there were any matters with which she could assist.

"Not at the moment," Jun Wu replied. "However, I am sure there will be much need for your help once the investigation is complete."

"Then I will remain in the Heavenly Capital for the time being and await summoning," the Rain Master said.

Jun Wu maintained his smile. Xie Lian couldn't tell what he was thinking, but he still didn't shed the pretense, even at that point.

"A good plan. You have been absent from the capital for years, so take this chance to refamiliarize yourself. The Rain Master residence has been empty for quite a while."

The Rain Master nodded and unhurriedly began to leave. Xie Lian knew that she would be monitored from the moment she left, which made him anxious.

Unexpectedly, the Rain Master turned back around. "Your Highness."

Xie Lian's heart skipped. "Does Lord Rain Master have guidance to impart?"

Could she have finally noticed that something was wrong?

“Nothing of the sort,” she replied. “I’ve been away from the Heavenly Capital for many years, so I’ve brought along some souvenirs. I thought I’d give you some. Would you be willing to receive them?”

Xie Lian hadn’t expected anything like that. He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“Huh? Ah…thank you.”

Jun Wu, of course, never accepted gifts, but he smiled as he allowed the Rain Master’s escorts to enter. “Xianle, Lord Rain Master wants to give you some presents. Why don’t you accept them quickly?”

“…”

The way he said that made Xie Lian sound like a young child being taught his manners—a guest had come to visit and brought a gift for the child, and the elder was prompting the child to receive it and thank them. Xie Lian had no choice but to do so.

A farmer approached and presented a very tightly wrapped package with both hands. Xie Lian uttered a casual thanks and took the package distractedly—and then, suddenly, his expression changed as if he’d noticed something important.

He had his back to Jun Wu, so his face should have been hidden. But Jun Wu still asked, “What kind of gift is it?”

Once the Rain Master saw that he had taken the gift, she cupped her hands in courtesy and smiled. “Nothing valuable. They are but some local specialties grown from the earth. If there is nothing else, I will take my leave.”

“Please,” Jun Wu said.

With that, the Rain Master tugged at the black ox and leisurely set off with her escorts toward the residence she hadn't used for many years. Hugging the present to his chest, Xie Lian was about to leave as well when Jun Wu called to him.

"Hold it."

Xie Lian stopped like his feet had been nailed to the ground.

"Come back," Jun Wu ordered.

Xie Lian returned to the hall and turned to look at him. Jun Wu stepped off the throne and took the package from Xie Lian's tight grip.

"Now you may go."

Paranoid as expected—he confiscated the Rain Master's gift immediately. Xie Lian glanced at him, then wordlessly returned to his Palace of Xianle.

Xie Lian was restless and paced back and forth in the hall. He didn't know how long it had been when he suddenly heard a bright, clear voice.

"Your Highness?"

Xie Lian whirled around. A young man wearing ragged clothes and a bandana tied around his head had somehow hopped onto the windowsill without him noticing. He stood perched there with a playful grin directed at Xie Lian!

Xie Lian was overjoyed. He dashed for two steps before remembering that this young man had just called him "Your Highness," which made him stop in his tracks.

He asked, a little uncertainly, "Are you…San Lang?"

The young man laughed heartily and hopped down from the windowsill, yanking off the scarf as he did. As his black hair tumbled down, he tied it up swiftly, revealing a pale, handsome face underneath—one that was completely different from a few moments before. It was a face that Xie Lian knew very well indeed.

Hua Cheng twirled the headscarf leisurely and sighed. “Gege, my dear gege. This time, seeing you is as hard as ascending to the heavens.”

The moment Xie Lian had received the Rain Master’s gift at the Palace of Divine Might, he did notice something unusual. However, it wasn’t the gift itself that caught his attention—it was the person delivering it.

When Xie Lian took the package, the person had grasped his hand and squeezed it.

That sort of gesture was generally frivolous—it would have been intentionally flirtatious if done to a lady. At the time, Xie Lian had only blinked and tried to remain expressionless, then gazed at the person across from him without alarm. The one standing there was a tall young man. Although he was dressed the part of a farmer, with patched, muddy clothes and a scarf wrapped around his head, his features were fine and handsome, and his eyes twinkled with light. However, that light only twinkled in the instant their eyes met. When Xie Lian blinked again, the young man had returned to his shy, guileless disposition and stepped back with a bowed head.

If Hua Cheng had sought him out at the Palace of Xianle, he must have taken care of all monitoring eyes in the area. The moment Xie Lian saw him, he knew that he was incomparably dependable. There was nothing left to worry about!

Before Hua Cheng could even walk over, Xie Lian had pounced.

It was a powerful hug indeed, but Hua Cheng wasn't pushed back by the force at all; he didn't even wobble. He only placed his hands on Xie Lian's back, chuckling lightly without saying a word. Xie Lian felt thoroughly cheered, but then he remembered something.

"Wait, San Lang!" he quickly said. "The Empe…Jun Wu is quite wary of you. You should be guarding the human array at the royal capital. He must've sent eyes down to watch you; won't he notice that you vanished suddenly? And is it really all right for the Wind Master to guard the array by himself?"

"Relax, gege," Hua Cheng replied, "it's already been taken care of. I won't be exposed for the moment."

Xie Lian assumed he must have blocked the eyes Jun Wu sent or left a clone behind, so he didn't press for more information on how things were "taken care of."

"It seems gege really missed me," Hua Cheng remarked leisurely.

"…"

Xie Lian remembered the nonsense they had exchanged through spiritual communication while Jun Wu listened in, then noticed how tightly he was clinging to Hua Cheng. He immediately loosened his grip and straightened up before replying in a schooled voice.

"Mm-hmm, yes. You said we needed to enlist someone's help. So that someone was Lord Rain Master."

Hua Cheng smiled at him cheerfully. “Correct. The Rain Master has resided in the lower realms for years and just happened to be alerted by the opening of Mount Tonglu. It’s perfectly logical that she would return to the heavens to check on things. The Rain Master would have noticed something amiss if Jun Wu refused her entrance without a good reason, so of course he had to let her in. Gege, don’t worry, it’s fine—you can keep clinging onto me like that. I don’t mind.”

Xie Lian softly cleared his throat. “No, it’s all right, thank you… But why can’t he do anything to the Rain Master?”

“Gege might not know this… The Rain Master presides over agriculture. This godly role might seem dreary and unimpressive on the surface, so most aren’t interested, but it’s actually a unique position. Right now, Yushi Huang is the *only* heavenly official who presides over agriculture.”

Xie Lian mused upon this information, piecing together the full picture.

“People put food above all else,” Hua Cheng continued. “If the Rain Master was killed and an appropriate heavenly official couldn’t be found to replace her, agriculture would stop working smoothly and the world would be thrown into chaos. And people stop worshipping if they can’t fill their stomachs. Their anger would be with the Rain Master first, but they also might become dissatisfied with the great god above her head—so the fire could burn all the way to Jun Wu if he isn’t careful. If he doesn’t control the situation properly, it might cause the kind of riots that topple gods.”

That meant riots to desecrate his temples and topple his divine statues, just as the people of Xianle once did.

“On top of that, the Rain Master doesn’t build temples or shrines, hasn’t resided in the Heavenly Capital for years, and has no desire to be promoted,” Hua Cheng added. “So there isn’t really anything he can use to threaten or coerce her. It would be hard for him to find a proper reason to officially banish her either, so it’s difficult for him to make any kind of move against her. And his position will remain stable as long as the Rain Master continues to manage agriculture, so he would prefer to keep up the pretense for as long as he can—deceive her for now, then decide what to do later if the truth comes out.”

“I see… Thank goodness,” Xie Lian said, relieved. “This was almost a disaster—the Lord Rain Master really has come to our aid in a time of need. Hopefully her acting skills are extraordinary. Oh, and by the way, we must go find the state preceptor! I have too many questions that only he can answer.”

With that, they stopped their dallying and hurried out of the Palace of Xianle. The moment Xie Lian crossed the threshold, he was startled to see a row of guards at the entrance. He readied himself to whip them unconscious with Ruoye but then noticed that they were all as wooden as dolls—their posture was stiff and their expressions unchanging. They had all been petrified by Hua Cheng.

Along the way, the shimmering silver light from Hua Cheng’s vambraces transformed into silver butterflies, which gradually went transparent and hid all around them as they went. Hundreds upon thousands of wraith butterflies were dispersed throughout the Heavenly Capital. The pair perfectly evaded every patrolling guard along the way by dodging up or down, or abruptly hiding and emerging when the coast was clear.

Hua Cheng stood next to Xie Lian as they watched a troop of patrolling guards stomp by their hiding spot in an alley. “After this stretch, we’ll take the path above.”

Xie Lian nodded and leapt onto the roof, following Hua Cheng’s lead. They leapt across the rooftops one after the other, leaving no traces in their wake.

A short while later, Xie Lian dropped onto the corner of a roof and abruptly stopped. He looked back at Hua Cheng, pensive.

Seeing him go still, Hua Cheng stopped as well. “What is it? Did you notice something?”

Xie Lian creased his brow and shook his head. He said thoughtfully, “No, but it’s just… It feels like this scene has played out somewhere before—”

Before he could finish, Hua Cheng abruptly hugged him around the waist. The next moment, the two “fell” from the rooftop.

The world spun, going topsy-turvy. Xie Lian’s bamboo hat slipped from his back, and he swiftly snatched it before it could fall to the ground. Meanwhile, Hua Cheng held him in his embrace as the two hung upside down from the eaves of some palace’s roof. Above them, something crawled rapidly past, *pata pata*.

Xie Lian was no stranger to that sound—it was the fetus spirit crawling around! Who knew what it was doing; perhaps it was on patrol?

Just then, another voice came from the streets below.

“Cuocuo, Cuocuo?”

Jian Lan!

Oh no! Xie Lian cried in his head. The fetus spirit was still right above them on the roof; they would be discovered if Jian Lan walked over and saw them from below. Xie Lian couldn't be sure what Jian Lan's reaction would be—if she would remain silent out of gratitude to Hua Cheng for saving her life or if she would yell to alert the enemy.

Her light, flustered steps got closer and closer until they were just about to turn the corner. Thankfully, the fetus spirit finally jumped down the other side of the roof.

The two quickly flipped over and hopped on top of the building. Xie Lian let out a breath of relief.

When Jian Lan peeked around a corner of the wall and saw that her son had jumped down to the ground, she let out her own breath of relief and went over.

"Cuocuo! Stop running around. This is a strange and unfamiliar place, and it's kind of scary. If you ran off and disappeared, Mom wouldn't even know where to go to find you… Why did you come here?!"

Her eyes had landed on the palace's establishment plaque, and she backed away a few steps at the sight. When Xie Lian saw her reaction, he determined that the golden palace beneath their feet must be the Palace of Nan Yang—which meant that Feng Xin was currently locked inside!

Jian Lan must have also known that, and her face twitched lightly. A moment later, she looked down to scold the fetus spirit. "Why did you come here?!"

The fetus spirit was hugging something white and lumpy. *Crunch, crunch*… It sounded like it was gnawing on it.

"What is that?!" Jian Lan then yelled. "What random thing are you eating?! Spit it out!"

Taking a closer look, Xie Lian discovered that it was a giant, hefty white radish, and he didn't know whether to laugh or cry. There was no need for Jian Lan to say that, as the fetus spirit obviously didn't like the taste. *Ptooey, ptooey!* It spat the radish out with force, then started shrieking like it was throwing a tantrum.

Jian Lan hurried over to cradle it, coaxing, "Okay, okay, okay, Cuocuo is a good boy. If it doesn't taste good, just don't eat it. Only poor bastards and silly gods like to eat those things—we don't eat them."

No one but a birth mother could cradle such a horrifyingly deformed creature in her arms and still comfort it in a gentle voice. The fetus spirit wiggled its chubby white body and cooed happily.

Unexpectedly, pity sprouted in Xie Lian as he watched this scene play out. However, he was also puzzled. "Why is there such a large radish in the Heavenly Capital?"

Hua Cheng quirked his brows. "Gege, did you forget? That's one of the souvenirs the Rain Master brought you, the gifts grown from the earth."

"…"

So *that* was the present the Rain Master had given him! Xie Lian tried to imagine Jun Wu's face when he opened that wooden box to discover it contained a huge white radish, but his attempt was a failure—it was impossible to picture. Once Jun Wu had finished inspecting the gift and determined it was nothing suspicious, he must have tossed the radish off to feed the fetus spirit.

It was like he was feeding a dog.

After the fetus spirit spat out the giant white radish, it had kicked it away in disgust. But it seemed thoughtful after hearing Jian Lan's words, then suddenly leapt out of its mother's embrace. It bounded over, grabbed the radish in its mouth, and then charged into the palace. If Xie Lian didn't look closely, it really did resemble a smooth-skinned, hairless white dog.

Jian Lan called after it, "Don't go in there! That's…"

The soldiers guarding the Palace of Nan Yang didn't even blink, much less stop it from going inside—they had probably been told that the fetus spirit was Jun Wu's pet or hunting dog. Jian Lan had no choice but to follow it.

The fetus spirit seemed to harbor a deep animosity toward Feng Xin, and Xie Lian was worried that it would hurt him.

He turned his head. "San Lang?"

A transparent butterfly rested on the tip of Hua Cheng's finger. "A wraith butterfly is already hidden on her person."

Xie Lian nodded, and the two monitored the situation inside the Palace of Nan Yang. Jian Lan was bent low to the ground, sneaking around the palace as if she didn't want anyone to discover her.

Hesitantly, she whispered, "Cuocuo—"

However, it was impossible not to be discovered. The fetus spirit bounced into the main hall and found a man seated in meditation. As the man blinked his eyes open, his gaze met Jian Lan's, and they both startled.

After the initial shock, Feng Xin was delighted. "Jian Lan!" he exclaimed, rising to his feet. "Why have you come? Are you all right? You're here just in time; help me—"

Just then, the fetus spirit started howling. It jumped between the two, then spat the giant white radish onto the ground and sent it flying with a forceful kick. The giant, gnawed white radish smacked Feng Xin squarely in the face with an enormous *thud*.

After punting the produce, the fetus spirit seemed quite proud of itself, babbling loudly and cackling evilly. It seemed to be waiting for its mother's praise. Feng Xin was almost knocked unconscious by the attack, and he wiped away the line of blood streaming from his nose as he yelled in complete outrage.

"What are you doing? Stay still, will you?!"

Feng Xin was fierce, but the fetus spirit was fiercer, and it screeched at him with a slithering tongue. Ready to grab for it, Feng Xin took a sharp step forward, but the attempt only got his arm bitten by its gaping mouth. No matter how hard he tossed his arm, he couldn't get rid of it. This familiar scene was both horrifying and hilarious, and Feng Xin's fury grew when he was unable to fling it off despite his best efforts.

"What the fuck?! What the actual fuck?! Are you looking for a beating?! What the hell?!"

Jian Lan snapped out of it and cried out, "Stop! What right do you have to yell at him or beat him?!"

Feng Xin was startled to be called out like that, and his spirit diminished by half. "It… It recognized a crook as its father! Why is it on Jun Wu's side…? How did it turn out like this?!"

Jian Lan clicked her tongue. "'How,' you ask? Wasn't it thanks to you?! Feeding without teaching is the father's failing![3] If you hadn't been slacking off on your duty as his father, would your own son have been dug out of his mother's womb and made into something like this? 'What the hell?' This is the hell *you* gave life to!"

Feng Xin backed up a step at each one of her condemnations, and the volume of his voice diminished greatly. "But… But I didn't know about any of that. And at the time, you told me to get lost—"

"Ha!" Jian Lan exclaimed. "I told you to get lost to *help* you! You came to this bitch's bedside every day with that godforsaken gloominess; you think I didn't know what you were thinking?! You had to serve your crown prince and collect enough money to help buy my freedom at the same time—you were battered and bruised, tired and annoyed! Since you didn't have the heart to up and leave, I decided to send you off!"

"I *was* very tired back then!" Feng Xin cried. "But I was never annoyed with you! I wanted to help you!"

Jian Lan jabbed at his chest. "*Please!* You wanted to help? Deep down, you knew damn well whether you could actually afford this bitch's price tag with your meager abilities! You *wished* you could split every penny in half and spend it twice. Every day, you hit the streets to busk and still had to pay your respects to your crown prince and your ol' emperor—you're lucky that I didn't throw myself at you to add to your burden. Expecting you to buy my freedom—what a dream!"

"That's not what you said at the beginning! We even made a promise! I always keep my word—"

Jian Lan cut him off. "There are plenty of promises and oaths out there, but think for a moment. What have you actually given me, huh? Other than that golden belt—oh, wait, it was *only* that golden belt, and you even exhorted me over and over to never sell it!"

Her jabbing had Feng Xin backing up step after step, his expression stiff and ashamed. The more Jian Lan spoke, the angrier she became.

“Or did you mean that godforsaken protection charm? I must’ve been completely blind to believe that shitty charm could protect anyone! There was barely any good luck, but there sure was a *fuck-ton* of bad! You had less and less money, and your temper certainly got worse and worse. What was I to do if I didn’t let you go, huh? Keep tormenting you to death?! Torment you to the point where you’d be annoyed with me, complain about me, hate me, and never want to see me ever again?!”

“…”

It wasn’t just Feng Xin—even Xie Lian didn’t know what to say anymore as he listened in from above the Palace of Nan Yang.

So that was how it was.

Xie Lian recalled many things from long ago—Feng Xin’s early morning departures and late-night returns, his exhaustion, his strange, sudden highs and lows, and that awkward attempt he’d made to borrow money from him. All those insignificant yet unusual gestures now had an explanation.

Feng Xin was Xie Lian’s servant and good friend, but not his slave. He could’ve built his own home, had his own family—and he had even found the person he wanted to do that with, but it just had to happen during the toughest days of Xie Lian’s first banishment. At the time, Xie Lian himself was struggling to survive, so how could he possibly have noticed those details? He was suffering, but Feng Xin was also suffering. Everyone was suffering. And in the end, they finally couldn’t keep it going—perhaps Jian Lan had long foreseen such an ending.

But Feng Xin still did his utmost to try and support Xie Lian, even during that time. He had even given Jian Lan the protection charms that no one cared for anymore, telling her that they could grant good luck—which was why she had carefully tucked one away in the little robes that her unborn child would one day wear.

Of course, that protection charm ultimately proved useless in bringing them any good fortune whatsoever.

Looking as if she had said some things she shouldn’t have, Jian Lan quickly scooped the fetus spirit from the ground, then turned to leave.

“Jian Lan!” Feng Xin called out. He was clearly at a loss, lamenting as he pulled at his hair. “Come…come back. I’m still…” He sighed. “I still feel that…I…I want to take care of both of you. I *should* take care of both of you. I have a duty—I promised.”

Jian Lan turned and stared at him squarely for a moment, tightening her hug on the fetus spirit in her arms. And then, she let out a humph.

“No need. I know you scorn your son. He’s nothing but some hellish creature in your eyes. It’s fine, *I* don’t mind.”

Feng Xin finally came to his senses and countered, “I don’t scorn it!”

“Then why are you always so mean to him?” Jian Lan questioned. “Can you really accept him as your son?”

“As long as it can return to the path of righteousness, how can I not?” Feng Xin replied.

Jian Lan sneered. “Then let me ask you again. You’re a heavenly official. Do you dare recognize him as your son?”

Feng Xin was taken aback. This reaction was natural. The fetus spirit clung to its mother’s arms, baring its teeth at him. It looked like an ugly, poisonous insect larva or the deformed spawn of a vicious beast—anything except human.

What heavenly official would dare admit to such an affair or recognize such a hellish creature as their son? It would be an enormous stain on his reputation, and his worshippers and merits would be affected greatly!

Chapter 116:
The Path Shan’t Go Astray, but the Mandates Are All the Same

FENG XIN WAS ONLY SHOCKED into silence for a few moments before he had an answer, but Jian Lan sneered before he could voice it.

“Forget it. You don’t need to say anything. You’re someone else’s prisoner right now. Even if you dared to claim your son, it would be nothing but an empty promise—I won’t believe a word you say, so don’t bother saying anything. Even if you’re willing to take him as your son, I might not be willing to have you as his father!”

The fetus spirit was curled in her arms, wagging its tongue at Feng Xin and snickering in a voice that sounded like a grown man’s. Jian Lan gave it a forceful slap on the behind to scold it.

“Why are you still pulling faces? I told you not to run off—you’re driving me crazy!”

The fetus spirit’s ugly little face scrunched up, and it finally behaved. The mother and child hurried out of the Palace of Nan Yang while Feng Xin called out from behind.

“Jian Lan! Jian Lan!”

No response. In the end, he was again left alone within the Palace of Nan Yang. Feng Xin slumped back. Supporting his head with his hand, he glared for a long moment at the giant white radish that had been left behind, covered in rows of crooked bite marks. Then he lay flat on the ground. He wasn’t even left with the energy to curse.

Above the Palace of Nan Yang, Xie Lian sighed.

“Gege, do you remember that night on Mount Yujun?” Hua Cheng suddenly asked. “The fetus spirit appeared there as well.”

Xie Lian knew he was purposely changing the subject, but the business with the fetus spirit appearing at Mount Yujun was also highly suspicious, so he forced himself to focus on it.

“I remember. While I was riding in the marriage sedan, it used a nursery rhyme to give me hints on how to find the Ghost Bride, Xuan Ji. It didn’t let anyone else hear—it was a song for me specifically. I wonder why.”

“It was probably acting on Jun Wu’s direction,” Hua Cheng said.

“Then the rhyme spelled out Jun Wu’s objective,” Xie Lian said. “As for why it’s become a fierce spirit under Jun Wu’s command…I’m afraid these are all questions for the state preceptor.”

“Then let’s go ask him,” Hua Cheng said. “I’ve got good news for gege: the wraith butterflies have already found where the state preceptor is being held.”

Xie Lian’s spirits lifted. “Where?”

***

The Palace of Ling Wen.

The palace was no longer bustling inside and out with countless civil gods rushing around with scrolls stacked high as mountains. Instead, it was now patrolled by the rigid, expressionless Divine Might Guard.

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng dropped soundlessly onto the corner of one of the roofs.

"The state preceptor is locked up here? Is Ling Wen watching him?" Xie Lian said.

"Correct," Hua Cheng replied. "With the Brocade Immortal on her, Ling Wen is currently considered both a civil god and a martial god."

After observing intently for a moment, Xie Lian commented, "Then this is going to be tricky."

Although the Brocade Immortal was no match for them, it still possessed a high level of cultivation and had keener senses than the guards patrolling the grand avenue of the Heavenly Capital. If Xie Lian and Hua Cheng were reckless while infiltrating the Palace of Ling Wen, the Brocade Immortal might detect them even if it couldn't defeat them—and once it had discovered them, Ling Wen would surely be alerted.

"Ling Wen and Jun Wu must be able to communicate with each other spiritually. If she discovers us, he will too," Xie Lian said. "She's a civil god without the Brocade Immortal and wouldn't be able to detect us. And the Brocade Immortal is a mere robe when it's not being worn, so it won't be able to alert Jun Wu either. We have to think of a way to separate them."

"We don't need to think of a specific plan. She'll have to take it off sooner or later," Hua Cheng said.

No explanations required; Xie Lian understood.

The Brocade Immortal was an evil object; its evil qi was thick and heavy. Since Ling Wen hadn't been formally banished, she was still considered a heavenly official, and it would be bad for her health to continue to wear it. Wearing it also required her to maintain her male form, which drained her spiritual power. Not many people could handle that level of exhaustion, and so there had to be a time every day when she took it off to rest.

They were whispering plans to each other when a black-clad man strolled out of the Palace of Ling Wen with one hand tucked behind his back. After he gave some instructions to the soldiers on guard outside, he stepped into a side chamber, then exited the chamber a few moments later and entered the main hall anew.

That man was Ling Wen—in male form when he entered the side chamber and in her true form upon exit. Her black outer robe had disappeared, and her steps weren't as light and energetic as they had been when she was in male form, a sign of skill in martial arts.

She had in fact removed the robe—the Brocade Immortal was now in that side chamber! The two exchanged a look.

"Now they're separated," Hua Cheng said. "Gege, you've got pretty good luck."

Xie Lian puffed a breath and gave him a look. "It's San Lang's luck that's pretty good."

Hua Cheng grinned. "Main hall? Side chamber?"

After some thought, Xie Lian decided, "Let's go with the side chamber! Who knows what the situation is like inside the Palace of Ling Wen's main hall. If the state preceptor is being kept right next to Ling Wen, we won't be able to get around her. But maybe we can force a negotiation if we get our hands on the Brocade Immortal."

Thus, the two waited for a short while and took advantage of a changing of the guard to hop off the roof and sneak into the side chamber.

The moment they leapt inside, Xie Lian wiped away his cold sweat.

Sneaking into a lady official's private chambers wasn't something to be proud of, no matter the circumstances. However, his nervous expression faded a bit when he saw the state of the side chamber. Xie Lian's old rooms were more sumptuous than this, Feng Xin's more disorderly, and Mu Qing's more tasteful and exquisite. In any case, this didn't look like a lady official's private chamber at all, so Xie Lian didn't feel as stressed.

The chamber was sparsely furnished, so it could hardly hide anything. It wasn't long before Xie Lian fumbled out a chest, but his face darkened the moment he opened it. It wasn't only because he'd gotten a face full of evil qi but also because the chest was packed full of identical black robes.

This again!

It was the same as last time, when they had to try and find the real Brocade Immortal among hundreds of different articles of clothing. It had been a circus looking for the thing, practically a nightmare. This time there weren't as many sets, only around a dozen, but each robe was black and almost identical to the rest. It was hard to tell which situation was more demoralizing. Was the Brocade Immortal even here?

Feeling his head throb, Xie Lian asked miserably, "San Lang…what's Jun Wu doing right now? Do we have enough time?"

Hua Cheng had been closely monitoring the movement of everyone in the capital. At Xie Lian's question, he replied languidly, "Gege, relax. We've got plenty of time. Jun Wu hasn't noticed you're gone. He's currently at the Palace of Divine Might and has brought Mu Qing in to interrogate. By the looks of it, it'll be a while."

Xie Lian was stunned by the news. “Mu Qing? He’s interrogating Mu Qing? Why?”

“Wraith butterflies can’t enter the Palace of Divine Might, so I can’t hear clearly. But you know…” Hua Cheng said, staring at Xie Lian, “it must not be anything good.”

Xie Lian remembered how Jun Wu had treated Yin Yu and anxiety gripped him. But worrying wouldn’t help anything, so he said resolutely, “Let’s hurry, then. Let me try on each of the robes. San Lang, come give me orders.”

If the Brocade Immoral didn’t want to be discovered or didn’t want to take the life of whoever was wearing it, it could be worn casually. However, if someone made another person wear it and gave them orders, that person had to obey. They would be able to expose the real thing using that method, but it was slightly dangerous.

“Let me do it,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian shook his head. “San Lang, you’ve worn the Brocade Immortal before, but it doesn’t really work on you for some reason. Maybe it’s ineffective against ghost kings? Only I can do this.”

He removed his white outer robe and dropped it on the ground by his feet. Hua Cheng raised an eyebrow and picked out a black robe to hand to him.

“Then I will take you up on your offer.”

Xie Lian swiftly put on the robe. Thank goodness, thank goodness; Ling Wen’s black robes weren’t at all sensual or revealing in the chest area. They were all very conservative and proper, so putting them on wasn’t embarrassing. Xie Lian looked up.

“Okay, you can give me an order now.”

“…”

Hua Cheng’s right hand held his left elbow, and his left hand propped up his chin. He looked at Xie Lian, seeming to think very seriously for a moment.

“Then, gege, my order is…”

Hua Cheng smiled happily. The anticipated command came mere moments later.

“Borrow spiritual power from me.”

“…”

Of course, Xie Lian understood what he meant by “borrow spiritual power,” and his head almost started smoking. He quickly took off the robe. “It… It’s not this one!”

“Ahh, what a shame. It’s not that one,” Hua Cheng lamented.

Xie Lian schooled his expression. “San Lang, you… This isn’t right. Be more serious, please. Don’t give orders like those.”

“Am I not being serious enough? Then what kind of orders do you mean?” Hua Cheng asked with humility. “Can gege be more specific?”

Xie Lian gave two soft coughs. “…Either way, you can’t make me borrow spiritual power from you,” he replied severely. “Anything else is fine—like ‘turn around in a circle,’ ‘jump twice,’ or something like that. Whatever you want.”

Hua Cheng cocked an eyebrow. “Everything else is fine, is it? Very well, I understand.”

He handed Xie Lian another robe. Xie Lian swiftly put it on and looked up at Hua Cheng once more.

Hua Cheng watched him for a moment. “Gege…”

A moment later, he broke into a wide smile.

“Don’t borrow spiritual power from me.”

“…”

He’d been careless! How could Hua Cheng do this?!

Xie Lian hastily began to strip. “Okay! It’s not this one eith—”

Hua Cheng stopped him. “Wait, gege, who says it’s not this one? You haven’t proven it yet.”

“Don’t borrow spiritual power from me” had been Hua Cheng’s order, and Xie Lian had to disobey it to prove the robe he was wearing right now wasn’t the Brocade Immortal. Which meant he had to do the opposite thing: borrow spiritual powers from Hua Cheng.

They had gone around in a circle and returned to the starting point!

Xie Lian was shaken as he stared at Hua Cheng’s serious expression.

“That’s… You’re too sly; you can’t do that.”

Hua Cheng hugged his arms. “Why not? Gege, didn’t you say it yourself? ‘Anything else is fine, just don’t ask me to borrow spiritual power.’ Since you didn’t like that command, I ordered you to do the complete opposite. How can you say I’m sly? Wasn’t I just staying true to your words?”

At a loss for what to say or how to dispute his logic, Xie Lian raised his finger to point at him for a moment. “You…you… Ahh, I can’t win with you! Stop playing around!”

Without any further delay, he rushed over and gave Hua Cheng a peck on the lips. Even though Xie Lian knew there was no one around, he still looked around after he'd done the deed as if afraid someone might be peeping.

Hua Cheng's face didn't twitch in the slightest. "Very good," he said calmly. "It's clearly not this one either; we've verified as much."

Xie Lian removed the second black robe. "…Don't give that order again either, all right?"

Hua Cheng passed a third one to him and smiled. "Fine, fine. As gege wishes."

Xie Lian took the robe from him, woefully thinking, *It feels like San Lang is getting harder and harder to deal with… Is it just my imagination?*

Although he was still worried Hua Cheng might give more prank orders, Hua Cheng did stop teasing him after those two jokes…but now it seemed strange that he was being so serious.

Xie Lian tried on each of the dozen robes inside the chest, but he didn't obey any of Hua Cheng's orders. Could the real Brocade Immortal not be here? That was impossible. Ling Wen had to have taken it off, and besides, the entire chest was tainted with its evil qi. It had to be in there!

Hua Cheng leaned against the door bar. "Gege, it seems the Brocade Immortal isn't just ineffective against me. It doesn't work on you either."

What could the problem be?

Chapter 117:
Hard to Put On, Harder to Take Off

XIE LIAN PULLED OUT all the black robes and started blindly picking at them in a random attempt to find the Brocade Immortal, but he found no success. He could only put his cast-off white cultivator robe back on and turn to Hua Cheng.

“This really isn’t working… Looks like we’ll have to take the entire chest with us.”

Hearing this, Hua Cheng let out a chuckle. Xie Lian was a little woeful, feeling rather ridiculous; it was so silly to drag dozens of robes around as blackmail material. But with things as they were, he didn’t have any better ideas.

Just as he was stuffing all the randomly strewn black robes back into the chest so they could carry the whole thing out, the doors to the side chamber opened unexpectedly. Ling Wen walked in with hands clasped behind her back, looking exhausted.

“…”

“…”

She had probably finished resting and returned to put the Brocade Immortal back on. But she had run into two uninvited guests who had broken into her chamber—one looking incredibly innocent, the other looking nonchalant.

With no comment on the situation before her, she immediately pressed two fingers against her temple. She was going to inform Jun Wu!

However, Hua Cheng moved faster than she did. With one sweeping look, the two doors to the side chamber slammed shut. Ling Wen lowered her hand, her face dropping as well.

“Hua-chengzhu is quite impressive.”

“San Lang, you’ve created a ward?” Xie Lian asked.

“A small one,” Hua Cheng said, “in only this side chamber.”

Jun Wu could establish a ward that spanned the Heavenly Capital, isolating everyone within from the outside world. And Hua Cheng could create a smaller ward within that one—a ward that sealed the spiritual powers of those within and prevented them from accessing spiritual communication. The side chamber had become a chest within a chest. Such wards would need to remain small, lest Jun Wu notice—it was his domain in the end.

Xie Lian nodded. “Ling Wen, I’m sure you can see that the Brocade Immortal is currently in our hands. If you don’t want it to be burnt to ash by ghost fire, please don’t make any reckless moves.”

Yet unexpectedly, Ling Wen only laughed.

“But Your Highness,” Ling Wen said, “the Brocade Immortal isn’t actually in your hands.”

To be honest, Xie Lian had suspected as much. Nonetheless, he still voiced the most logical deduction. “Ling Wen, you weren’t wearing it when you left this room earlier. I don’t think the Brocade Immortal is anywhere but here.”

“Your Highness, have you perhaps misunderstood?” Ling Wen replied. “I only said that it’s not inside the chest in your hands. I didn’t say it wasn’t inside this chamber.”

Her words made Xie Lian think of another possibility, and he cocked his head. Hua Cheng must've had the same thought, as they both moved their gazes to the white robe that Xie Lian was currently wearing.

"You guessed right," Ling Wen said. "Your Highness is wearing it right now."

When Xie Lian was trying on the black robes earlier, he had casually thrown aside the white robe he was wearing. All the robes had gotten lumped together when he was inspecting them afterward. Somehow, the Brocade Immortal had secretly taken on the appearance of his white cultivator robes—and Xie Lian had picked it up and put it on!

Xie Lian looked down at his clothes and wondered, *Then where's my original robe?*

With a casual motion of Hua Cheng's hand, the chest of robes toppled over on its own and spilled its contents onto the floor. Buried deep beneath the dozens of black robes was one white robe crushed at the very bottom—the real white robe Xie Lian had been wearing before.

This must have been the work of a malicious spell cast by the Brocade Immortal. While he was trying on clothes at random, it seized the chance to drag Xie Lian's outer robe into the chest, then slipped out and transformed to look like that robe and replace it. It then let itself be picked up and worn by Xie Lian.

Xie Lian wasn't surprised in the least, but he was rather baffled. "Isn't that a little too cunning?"

It was only an article of clothing, after all! Besides, wasn't the Brocade Immortal itself supposed to not be very clever? Assumedly Ling Wen had taught it this trick.

Sure enough, Ling Wen said, “I gave it the idea, though I didn’t actually think it’d see use. But that means that I was technically the one who made Your Highness wear the Brocade Immortal.”

If Hua Cheng had handed the robe to Xie Lian and he put it on, then Hua Cheng would be considered the one in control. However, the Brocade Immortal had used Ling Wen’s idea to trick Xie Lian into wearing it—and so the one in control now was Ling Wen. That meant Xie Lian would obey Ling Wen’s word and heed her every order!

“Ling Wen,” Xie Lian tried, “has it ever occurred to you that the Brocade Immortal might not work on me?”

Ling Wen smiled. “I won’t know until I’ve tried. Your Highness—from now on, you cannot attack me. If you hear me, nod your head.”

Although he didn’t intend to do so, as soon as he heard the order, Xie Lian involuntarily nodded before he even knew what was happening!

Why was it working now?! It clearly didn’t work earlier when Hua Cheng was the one giving orders! Was it only ineffective when the one in control was Hua Cheng?

If that was true, then the tables had suddenly turned. Xie Lian didn’t move, nor did Hua Cheng. They exchanged looks, both remaining calm and steady.

Ling Wen was calm and steady as well. “Now then, will Hua-chengzhu please remove the ward from this side chamber?”

“Don’t do it, San Lang,” Xie Lian said urgently.

“Are you sure, Your Highness?” Ling Wen said. “I can order you to do anything.”

Hua Cheng remained unflustered.

It's fine if I can't touch Ling Wen, Xie Lian thought. *No one else is under such restrictions. We'll be in the clear as long as San Lang catches her by surprise and stops her from giving any orders.*

However, Ling Wen was sharp and guessed their plans. "Hua-chengzhu, I suggest you don't waste your time thinking of ways to catch me by surprise and subdue me. Your Highness, listen well: you will attack Hua-chengzhu if he attempts to inflict any sort of harm on me."

With that, she blocked any plans they could've possibly used before they could even try!

"Now, Hua-chengzhu, time to remove the ward," Ling Wen said. "I still have work to do. The Palace of Ling Wen has an enormous backlog of reports I need to manage that haven't been gone through yet. Can we solve this little problem quickly?"

Hua Cheng only smirked.

The next moment, Ling Wen's eyes widened. She seemed as if she wanted to speak, but no voice came out.

If someone were standing behind her, they would discover that a wraith butterfly with fluttering silver wings had perched on the back of her neck. It was this tiny little creature that had stopped her body from moving and prevented her from making a sound.

Hua Cheng hugged his arms and flashed his incredibly fake and insincere smile before saying lazily, "Did you really think I'd need to catch someone by surprise to subdue them?"

"..."

Ling Wen couldn’t speak, but the words she wanted to say were clearly written on her expression: *“Hua-chengzhu, have you forgotten? I’ve already given His Highness an order!”*

The next moment, the Brocade Immortal activated its powers. Xie Lian abruptly turned around and lunged at Hua Cheng, hand raised to strike!

Some time passed before Xie Lian’s vision cleared, and he came to his senses with a start. “San Lang…!”

Hua Cheng was standing before him. At the center of his chest, there was a crushing hand upon his red robe. It was Xie Lian’s own.

Hua Cheng didn’t dodge the blow at all. He had stood there and allowed Xie Lian to deliver a full-force strike to his heart!

“…”

Xie Lian hadn’t yet processed this, hadn’t yet reacted, when Hua Cheng firmly gripped his wrist.

“There,” he said in a low voice. “The attack is complete, and the command released.”

Sure enough, once Xie Lian’s attack landed, he felt his body slacken and his freedom return.

For the sake of releasing Xie Lian from the command Ling Wen had given, Hua Cheng had really just stood there and taken the blow without even trying to dodge. Once released, Xie Lian quickly withdrew his hand, his face dropping.

It was a moment before he asked, “San Lang…are you hurt?”

He examined Hua Cheng's face closely. He couldn't see any physical changes, but Hua Cheng wasn't a living human, and his skin was already a snowy pale shade—as if he'd gone years without seeing sunlight. However, judging by his tone, it didn't sound like he was affected at all.

"Gege is indeed incredible. What a beautiful blow," he complimented with a smile.

But Xie Lian continued to look upset, almost as though Hua Cheng had scared him. "I wasn't joking around," he said sternly. "I used almost three-quarters of my full strength in that attack. Are you really all right?"

When Ling Wen gave her order, the word she had used was "attack." Typically, Xie Lian never used "attacking" as his intent when he exchanged blows with others—his moves were usually pure self-defense or to restrain a target. He wasn't sure what would happen if he unleashed a strike with "attack" as the driving force.

"I wasn't joking. Gege really is incredible," Hua Cheng replied slowly. "Perhaps not even Jun Wu would be your match if you weren't wearing those things."

Xie Lian unthinkingly touched his neck, but he immediately dropped his hand when he felt the cursed shackle.

Hua Cheng added, "Gege, I have a question for you."

"What is it?"

"You had a chance to remove those cursed shackles that bind you. Why did you keep them?"

Xie Lian hadn't expected him to ask that. "Maybe…it was to remind myself of some things." He then quickly said, "San Lang, don't…don't change the subject. What kind of bad habits have you developed? That situation just now—you could have just restrained me. Why did you stand there and take the blow?”

“So you do know that it’s a bad habit, gege?” Hua Cheng replied. “You have no right to lecture me when it comes to taking beatings, you know.”

“Oh, really?” Xie Lian said, but he felt guilty the moment the words left his mouth—after all, he’d almost swallowed a sword back when he fought the fetus spirit in the water, and Hua Cheng had caught him red-handed.

“Yes, really. ‘Why use other methods if I can solve the problem by taking a beating?’ That’s your bad influence on me,” Hua Cheng replied.

Xie Lian waved him off. “Never mind, San Lang, let’s not talk about this anymore. Let’s look at these robes.”

He tugged at the white robe’s hem, feeling deeply frustrated. This was just great—they had definitely found the Brocade Immortal, but now they had to think of a way to take it off.

Chapter 118:
Centuries of Pain, Millennia of Suffering

THERE WAS DEFINITELY no way the robe could be burned now that it was being worn, lest Xie Lian be burned along with it.

"I'll just keep wearing it for now," Xie Lian suggested. "It's not like it can suck my blood, and Ling Wen shouldn't be able to give any more commands either."

A puff of blue mist blew by, and when it cleared, a blue budaoweng doll stood where Ling Wen had once been. It wore a very serious expression, and it even seemed to be holding scrolls in its arms. Xie Lian picked it up and tucked it away in his robes, and then the two crept out of the side chamber and into the main hall.

It wasn't just his imagination—the main hall of the Palace of Ling Wen really looked more somber than before. The mountains of report scrolls stacked from floor to ceiling now seemed perilous, like they were going to collapse at any moment and crush anyone below dead. They didn't run into any guards as they sprinted straight for a set of vermilion doors at the heart of the palace.

Before they even got close, Xie Lian heard a trembling, shocked voice.

"How is this possible…? How could this be?"

It was the state preceptor! Could someone have gotten to him before they did?

Xie Lian kicked the door down with a growl. "Let him go!"

Sure enough, the state preceptor wasn't alone inside the chamber. Everyone turned their heads to look at the intruder who had kicked down the door. The shock on the state preceptor's face hadn't faded.

"Your Highness…?"

"…"

"…"

The state preceptor didn't look up at him for more than a moment before he lowered his head again.

"Just wait a second. How can this be? What kind of luck is this?!"

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng were both speechless.

The state preceptor and three other people had formed a full table inside the chamber and were in the middle of a heated round of cards, fully drunk on the game. Although previously stated to be three other "people," his opponents weren't actually alive; they were very crudely made paper dolls. Who knew what kind of bizarre spell had been cast that allowed them to move and even play cards. But as for the state preceptor, his cries had only been laments about the hand he'd been dealt.

Xie Lian had expected the state preceptor to be a haggard sight to behold, that he might be suffering interrogation and torture. He hadn't expected the state preceptor to still be playing cards at a time like this. The whole scene instead filled him with bittersweet nostalgia, and he didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

How could he not be nostalgic? During his days at the Royal Holy Temple, whenever he and Feng Xin went to look for the state preceptor, seven times out of ten he would be playing cards, cards, cards! Over eight hundred years had passed, but it was like no time at all as he once again watched the state preceptor play cards. Even the crazed passion on his face was exactly the same.

The state preceptor stared unblinkingly at the cards in his hand and spoke without looking back. “Your Highness, you’ve finally come. Let me finish this round first…”

Xie Lian knew this was an old bad habit rearing its head—the state preceptor recognized no one in the midst of a game. After seeing the figure he cut at the Palace of Divine Might, this version of him was unbearably different. Xie Lian went over and tried to drag him away from the table.

“Master, what do you think is happening now? Stop playing!”

The state preceptor’s eyes were red as he yelled, “No, don’t! Let me finish! I’m almost done! Just this round! Let me finish this hand! It’s almost done—I might win this time!”

“You won’t win! You definitely won’t win!” Xie Lian cried.

“…”

Thankfully, the round did end fairly quickly. Although the state preceptor had sworn he was going to win, unsurprisingly, he did not. He withdrew the three paper dolls with a wave of his hand and finally regained his normal, calm demeanor.

As he sat with poise, he said solemnly, “Your Highness, I knew you would come. I’ve been waiting for you.”

It certainly didn’t look like you were waiting for me… Xie Lian thought. But of course he didn’t say so out loud—respect for one’s elders had to be maintained, after all.

“I’m sure you have many questions,” the state preceptor continued.

Hua Cheng leaned against the doorframe. He almost looked like he was relaxing, but he was probably standing guard. Xie Lian sat properly before the state preceptor, matching his poise.

“Yes.” After a pause, Xie Lian asked, “First, I want to confirm: Is Jun Wu… Is he really White No-Face, and also the Crown Prince of Wuyong?”

“There’s no need for doubt,” the state preceptor replied. “He is.”

“I have no relation whatsoever with the Crown Prince of Wuyong, correct? Are we two completely separate people?” Xie Lian asked.

“The only connection you share with the Crown Prince of Wuyong is that he destroyed your home kingdom of Xianle.”

“But…Master, you once told me that you didn’t know what White No-Face was. And that you were certain he was born because of me,” Xie Lian said in a low voice.

“Your Highness, at the time, I genuinely did not know what that thing was,” the state preceptor replied. “And by the time I found out, it was already too late. However, I was not incorrect in saying he was born because of you.”

“What exactly does that mean?” Xie Lian asked. “And the question remains: why did he want to destroy Xianle?”

The state preceptor looked him in the eye. “Because of that phrase you said.”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “A phrase I said? What phrase?”

“Body in the abyss, heart in paradise.”

Xie Lian was speechless for a moment. Then he asked incredulously, “…That’s it?”

“That’s it,” the state preceptor said.

“That one phrase…?” Xie Lian questioned. “What was wrong with it?”

“Everything,” the state preceptor replied in a low voice. “Everything started with that line of yours!”

Xie Lian could sense that he’d have a hard time swallowing whatever the state preceptor was about to tell him. He wanted to call for Hua Cheng, but before he could do so, Hua Cheng had already come to sit beside him.

“You saw those murals at Mount Tonglu, correct?” the state preceptor asked.

“I did,” Xie Lian replied. “Were you the one who made them?”

“Yes, that was me,” the state preceptor replied. “Every time Mount Tonglu opened, I snuck in to prevent a new ghost king from being born… and to do whatever I could to leave some clues, to tell others the story of the Kingdom of Wuyong and its crown prince.”

“Why not just tell people directly?” Xie Lian asked solemnly. “Why use such a roundabout method?”

“Your Highness, why do you think almost no one in the world knows about the Kingdom of Wuyong?” the state preceptor asked.

Before Xie Lian could answer, Hua Cheng drew a conclusion for him. “Everyone who knew has been disposed of. Right?”

“That’s right,” the state preceptor replied. “I would be in danger of exposure if the clues left behind were too obvious or if I spoke of the matter directly. Anyone who learned of it might be utterly destroyed. It wouldn’t matter how many lives he had to end—he could level an entire city in three days. I'm sure you know that I'm not exaggerating."

Of course Xie Lian knew. And the ironic thing was, in the past he had been thankful that Jun Wu had ascended to godhood instead of falling to ghosthood—for if he had not, the world would have fallen into chaos.

"That is why I can't let him notice that there are still people in the world who know," the state preceptor continued. "But I also can't accept the fact that I'm the only one who really does. I told myself that the truth would eventually be discovered by anyone attentive and brave enough; since I cannot defy him, I should let fate take its course.

"I've been on the run for all these years, keeping hidden all the while. He's never been able to capture me, except for that incident eight hundred years ago when I almost couldn't get away. He managed it this time because he discovered the murals I left behind in the holy temple within Tonglu's crimson forest and because you correctly guessed his identity in the Kiln. It occurred to him then that I might still be alive and that I had left behind many things he didn't want people to know about."

When they passed through the holy temple within Tonglu's crimson forest, he and Hua Cheng had found that someone had destroyed the last couple of murals—the most important ones. They both suspected that person was hiding inside the temple with them at the time, but they hadn't managed to find the culprit. Now that he thought back on it, there was a very real possibility that White No-Face was hiding in some corner of that temple.

"But Master, why do you have to stay on the run?" Xie Lian asked.

The state preceptor replied, "Of course it's because—"

"Betrayal," Hua Cheng said.

The word was a little hurtful. The state preceptor shot him a look, but Hua Cheng's expression did not change.

"You betrayed him, didn't you?"

"Pretty much. That about covers it." The state preceptor turned to Xie Lian. "Your Highness, how shall I put this… Everything in the murals is true. The Crown Prince of Wuyong was like the sun itself to the Kingdom of Wuyong. As glorious as you were as the Crown Prince of Xianle, he was many times more.

"My three peers and I were once his vassals. After the crown prince ascended, he appointed the four of us to the heavens, and there we beheld many celestial beings of all types of character. Without exaggeration, he was still the sun even in the Heavenly Realm, shining so brightly in the sea of gods that those beside him lost their color."

As the state preceptor spoke, an unintentional flash of a smile curved his lips. When he spoke about "His Highness," Xie Lian could see that he wasn't referring to Jun Wu or White No-Face, but to that young crown prince from two thousand years ago.

"I think you told me a similar story long ago," Xie Lian said.

"Did I? Your memory gets bad when you're old."

"You did. But you didn't tell me he ascended. You told me that he died."

"That's probably because I'd rather he *hadn't* ascended," the state preceptor said.

"Was it because Mount Tonglu erupted?"

The state preceptor didn’t directly answer his question. He only said, “His Highness’s spiritual powers were too strong.

“In a dream, he foresaw the future of Wuyong as a sea of fire. And so he started thinking of ways to save his people. If I knew then what I know now, I would have never let him do it, but none of us back then thought things would turn out the way they did. We simply believed that if people were going to die, what could be wrong with saving them?

“But things weren’t so simple. It was impossible to stop the volcano from erupting, so the only option was to migrate if we wanted zero casualties. But the affected area was too large; it wasn’t just a matter of one or two cities. Nobles and commoners alike considered invasion the best method to claim new territory—otherwise, no foreign kingdom would allow such a great number of people from Wuyong to take up residence inside their borders. However, to His Highness, invasion wasn’t an option at all. War would result in bloodshed, which would lead to bloodlust. People would turn cruel and lose their humanity.

“Still, the Kingdom of Wuyong dispatched troops. There was complete annihilation wherever the soldiers marched. Since the objective was to make room for future Wuyong migrants, the generals gave the order to massacre the citizens of other kingdoms, the more the better. Blood flowed like rivers; corpses were piled high as mountains.

“When His Highness found out, he was very angry. As you saw, he descended upon the battlefield and punished the soldiers of Wuyong.”

Xie Lian was intrigued when he realized that the one who did those things was a young Jun Wu—and thus also a young White No-Face.

“But he wasn’t the only one who was angry,” the state preceptor continued. “The whole affair also angered the nobles of Wuyong and some of the common people. Many went to the holy temple to question His Highness. ‘We only wanted to survive. We needed more land, and we had no choice but to invade those other kingdoms. What’s wrong with that?’

“The impact of this incident was far bigger than we expected, and it only escalated further and further—some were already calling for the desecration of his statues and burning of his temples. But His Highness endured all of it. He said that he would die defending the kingdom if Wuyong was the one invaded—he would not allow the enemy to set a single toe across the border—but that we ourselves must never invade others. He earnestly implored everyone to abandon thoughts of war and to wait until he had finished building something: the Heaven-Crossing Bridge.

“If there was no more land in the Mortal Realm, then he’d send the people to take refuge in the heavens for a while,” the state preceptor said haltingly. “Although it was an inconceivable idea, all four of us believed in His Highness absolutely; we were convinced that he could do it. Or rather, we would do our utmost to support him in any endeavor he attempted. Of course, the other heavenly officials didn’t feel the same; the entire Heavenly Realm objected to it. But His Highness endured it all.

“He took on three burdens at once: the ignorance and complaints of the nobles and citizens of Wuyong, the incessant outrage of all the gods in heaven, and the enormous undertaking of the Heaven-Crossing Bridge.”

Hua Cheng snorted. “The heavens objected? I assume it was more than simple disagreements.”

The state preceptor nodded slowly. “If he’d faced mere opposition, it wouldn’t have mattered. But…”

Xie Lian could vaguely guess what had happened, but still he asked. “But?”

“The bridge required an enormous amount of time and a staggering amount of spiritual power to build. His Highness couldn’t be distracted at all,” the state preceptor said. “He essentially stopped going anywhere else, stopped doing anything else, and stopped listening to the prayers of his believers. He could only focus on this one massive undertaking.

“However, a god who can only do one thing will never be able to keep their followers. The first day he took on the burden of building the bridge, the people were grateful to him and remembered him; the second, third, and fourth days were the same. After a month, two months, they were still grateful and remembered him. But as time dragged on, things changed.

“The volcano hadn’t erupted yet, but His Highness didn’t do anything but silently conserve his strength. The people couldn’t help but feel that he wasn’t as powerful as he once was, or even that he wasn’t as dedicated. It was inevitable that they’d begin to worship a new god at a time like that.

“The Kingdom of Wuyong had a high population and abundant wealth, and its citizens were fervently devout. His Highness’s impressive strength made that quite obvious. Many heavenly officials had long been salivating over his domain and the believers within it, so…”

Xie Lian understood. “So…the other heavenly officials took advantage of this opportunity. The people of Wuyong resented their crown prince after he descended and forced the troops to withdraw, and the heavenly officials used that to tempt them. In doing so, they divided his believers and weakened the source of his spiritual power…right?”

“It’s not that His Highness didn’t know what they were doing. He just didn’t know what to do about it,” the state preceptor said.

Xie Lian inclined his head slightly. “He’s a god, so of course he couldn’t tell his devotees, ‘I won’t allow you to worship a god other than me.’” He would have scoffed at such a demand too.

“Naturally, you understand him very well,” the state preceptor said.

“But it just *had* to happen when he couldn’t afford to lose devotees or spiritual power lest it affect the construction of the Heaven-Crossing Bridge,” Xie Lian added.

“That’s precisely it,” the state preceptor said. “It was up to the four of us to speak to the people and let them know what was at stake.”

“And how did that go?” Xie Lian asked.

“It probably went nowhere,” Hua Cheng said.

“Nowhere indeed,” the state preceptor replied. “At least, it didn’t go nearly as well as we’d hoped. Some people returned as devotees, worried that the construction of the bridge might fail. But a larger number thought that His Highness was being domineering—their prayers were not being answered, so of course they began to worship other gods who would listen to their needs. They were free devotees, they could believe in whatever they wanted to believe—it was more than natural. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to please everyone, it’s just that he…”

Xie Lian sighed and whispered, “…He had the heart but not the strength.”

The state preceptor continued his tale. “After His Highness learned of this, he told us to stop our efforts—that if they wanted to go, we should let them. They wouldn’t be wholeheartedly devoted to him if they were kept by force. That was true, and even though we warned them over and over again, his devotees’ hearts had already wandered. If they forced themselves to return, it would only be to placate us. Their belief would no longer be sincere, so its power wouldn’t be as strong.

“He couldn’t be angry at the devotees, and he refused to request the help of other heavenly officials,” Xie Lian commented.

“Even if he did ask, the other heavenly officials would never have helped him,” the state preceptor said. “If they had been willing to lend a hand, they wouldn’t have been against it in the first place, and they wouldn’t have tried to lure away his devotees.

“His Highness became more and more silent and closed off as he used his own powers to build and support the bridge. I watched him every day. Although he said nothing, I could tell just how much he was suffering inside—suffering that he had to bear alone. No matter how much the four of us wanted to help, we couldn’t lighten his burden.

“Finally, after enduring all of this for three arduous years, it was time—the volcano was about to erupt.

“The moment the news broke, the people fought to swarm the bridge. As the four of us directed the frantic crowd, we worried about His Highness, as he was supporting the bridge all alone.”

The state preceptor sighed. “Before that, we never would have worried that there was something he couldn’t achieve. But at that time, we did. While the bridge was quite stable at first, it needed to be supported for longer and longer as the crowd grew larger and larger. His Highness's hands started to shake, and his face grew paler and paler.

"No one else could see him, only we could. I sensed things weren't right and told the people, 'Please wait a moment, give him a little bit of time! Don't swarm toward him all at once, just let him catch his breath! He will definitely save all of you.' But the volcano was about to erupt, and lives were in danger—no one was willing to wait. They all rushed onto the bridge like mad—some were even trampled to death in the stampede. We couldn't hold them back!

"In the end, what we had feared most came to pass. Because we'd kept losing devotees over those three years, His Highness's spiritual powers were no longer as strong as they once were. Hundreds of thousands of people swarmed onto the bridge at once, celebrating their salvation. But as they approached the Heavenly Realm, the bridge collapsed under their weight."

Xie Lian's breath hitched.

The state preceptor continued to speak. "The heavenly arch was shattered, and a crowd of millions dropped from the sky in an instant, wailing and screaming as they plunged into a sea of fire and burned to ash right before His Highness's eyes!

"I was completely stunned at the time and didn't dare look at His Highness's face. The bridge couldn't be repaired, the people couldn't be rescued, and the fire couldn't be extinguished—there was no way to help at all! And there were many more who hadn't yet made it onto the bridge, left behind to be entombed in lava and sealed by flying ash. Screeching, wailing, cursing. That scene was truly too horrible…I have never witnessed anything more horrifying since.”

Xie Lian tried to imagine the chilling display. The state preceptor continued his tale.

“The bridge collapsed. And the people of Wuyong went mad.

“They burned down His Highness’s temples, toppled his divine statues, used blades to stab his heart until it was mush. They cursed him as a useless creature, a shit excuse for a god. He was a god, and gods should be mighty and strong. Gods couldn’t fail. But he had. And so he could no longer remain on high.

“The officials in the Heavenly Realm had long been waiting for this moment. They said, ‘We told you it was impossible. You’ve caused a serious mess. We have no choice but to ask you to return to the realm below.’

“And His Highness asked a very foolish question: ‘Why didn’t any of you help me?’ But why would anyone help him for no reason? And if they’d allowed him to triumph over this enormous tribulation for the Kingdom of Wuyong, wouldn’t that mean he would never again have a match in the Heavenly Realm?

“That’s why it had been a very foolish question. I imagine he knew this, yet he still asked. No one answered him, of course, and His Highness was banished.

“He fell back to the Mortal Realm, no longer a god and no longer a crown prince. We followed him and assured him that he would certainly ascend again, and he began cultivating anew. But it was much too difficult. I’m sure you understand.”

Of course Xie Lian understood.

The higher one stood, the harder one fell. After falling from the heavens to the Mortal Realm, only endless cold and malice awaited him.

“The volcano was still erupting, and the Kingdom of Wuyong had fallen into a crisis worse than it had ever seen in all its history,” the state preceptor continued. “Refugees, rebellions, and invasions were incessant, and the people were at the end of their wits. Their attitude toward His Highness had deteriorated; it was entirely opposite from what it had been before. Even so, His Highness still wanted to help them.

“However, something else happened around that time—many other heavenly officials began to show their grace. Even though they hadn’t been willing to help save everyone from the volcano’s eruption, they were quite happy to grant little blessings, deliver a bit of medicine or food or other such things. Since His Highness was banished, his capacity to help was of course far smaller than those heavenly officials.

“It was as if the people of Wuyong had seized a lifeline or seen their parents born anew. He lost devotees even faster—though honestly, there weren’t many left anyway. All the praise and adoration once reserved for His Highness alone was given to other heavenly officials, and only hate and rejection remained for him.”

The state preceptor closed his eyes.

“At the time, we had a hard time coming to terms with it. We were upset with the unfairness of it all. Those other heavenly officials hadn’t helped the people all that much, and they only appeared after the disaster was over. His Highness was the one who did the most; he gave it his all, and he should’ve been successful too. He just fell one step short! Why was he the one doomed eternally? Why was the one who had given the most ignored, while all the praise and gratitude was lavished on the ones who'd given nothing but trifles?

"That was also when my way of thinking began to change. I couldn't help but think about what might have happened if His Highness had pretended that he'd never seen the future in his dreams—if he had chosen from the start to sit back and observe on the grounds that the gods could do nothing to change the course of fate and granted blessings after the volcano erupted like the other heavenly officials. Surely the people would have cried those tears of gratitude for him instead."

"Did that thought only cross your mind at that point?" Hua Cheng interrupted, voice flat. "You should've known from the beginning. If you slice off a piece of your flesh to save one person, that one person will be grateful. But the more you slice, the more that person will demand of you. Even if you cut yourself down to nothing but bones, they will still not be satisfied."

"I didn't dare tell him any of these thoughts," the state preceptor said. "His Highness grew more and more somber. I couldn't tell what he was thinking, had no idea if his feelings were the same as my own.

"Days passed, and the eruption continued. The entire Kingdom of Wuyong was mired in terror, unable to escape. No one knew how to make it stop, how to end this nightmare. But one day, His Highness told us that he had found a way to calm the volcano. When he told us how, we had a huge fight."

"Let me guess," Hua Cheng said. "The 'how' was human sacrifice."

"Correct," the state preceptor replied. "His Highness said that we could use a group of wicked degenerates as a sacrifice—we could throw them into the Kiln to pacify its furious flames. The four of us each had different opinions about this, but the consensus was opposition—we could never do anything of the sort. In the beginning, His Highness didn't want Wuyong to invade other kingdoms precisely because he didn't want to use a life to save a life. How would sacrificing lives to the Kiln be any different? It'd be even worse, in fact. The ones who were most opposed to the idea began to quarrel directly with His Highness.

"The argument was so severe that fists were thrown. I was against it too at first, but it was harder for me to bear internal discord in the same way I did the constant attacks from the outside. You must understand, the four of us had always supported His Highness, but by that point we were his *only* support. And yet in the heat of the moment, blows were exchanged, and one of us even accused His Highness of no longer being the Highness of the past—that he'd changed, that he'd forgotten his heart.

"Those words truly executed his heart. I couldn't stand it. If even we opposed and berated His Highness, then there was no one left in the world who stood by his side. I didn't object to his idea in the end; I only told him to let it go and stop worrying about such affairs. The Heavenly Realm, the Mortal Realm, all the refugees—stop caring about all of it. It was just too tiresome.

"However, no one listened to me. After that huge fight, the other three left."

Xie Lian shook his head, not knowing what to say. He knew too well that leaving at a time like that was like adding frost to snow.

“Only I stayed behind,” the state preceptor said. “His Highness didn’t say much when I did. He simply asked me, ‘Are you leaving?’

“The former Highness’s expression when he asked me that question…at that moment, I genuinely thought I’d understand even if he did sacrifice people to the Kiln. I said, ‘Your Highness, I won’t leave.’

“His Highness still didn’t say much, but he seemed to change his mind and never mentioned human sacrifices again. He set up a ritual site near the Kiln, and I accompanied him there every time, both of us enduring the curses and thrown rocks of the refugees as we conducted services to try to suppress the volcano’s fury. I thought that would be the end of the story. But one day, I discovered something that chilled me to the bone.”

The state preceptor’s expression turned terrifying, as if he was once again seeing the same image that chilled him all those years ago.

Xie Lian’s heart felt like it was being squeezed tight by an invisible hand. “What was it?”

“He… He suddenly started covering his face,” the state preceptor said.

“…”

“His Highness was handsome, and he’d never hidden his face before,” the state preceptor said. “And there wasn’t anything that could have injured him. It was the first time I’d ever seen him like that in all our years together, so I was perplexed. I asked him, ‘Your Highness, what happened to your face?’ He said he was accidentally burned. I didn’t know when he could have suffered such an injury, and he wouldn’t let me examine his wounds; he would only apply herbs on his own. After that, his whereabouts became unpredictable. That was unusual, but a wonderful thing happened that temporarily distracted me: the volcano began to calm.

"The Kiln gradually settled into stillness and did not show any further activity for a long time. Since His Highness had been the only one devoting himself to the matter, many people of Wuyong thought that he was the one who had suppressed the volcano, and some began to worship him anew. His Highness's path of cultivation also started progressing more smoothly. At least there weren't any more people jeering him or throwing rocks; they even gradually started smiling at him again.

"I still thought something wasn't right. There were *many* things that weren't right. While my three friends all had different personalities, I knew they wouldn't just leave and ignore everything going forward. Even if they were angry with His Highness, they wouldn't be angry with me too—at the very least, they wouldn't have cut me off entirely.

"What was most unusual was His Highness's face. He kept hiding it; at first wearing rags and cloaks, then later a mask that he wouldn't remove for any reason. I even began to wonder whether this person was really His Highness—sometimes I suspected an impostor, that it wasn't him at all. Everything about him had completely changed: the way he spoke, his behavior, his personality. Sometimes he was kind and dear, sometimes he'd abruptly fly into a rage. There was an incident where he smashed all the mirrors in his room while he was alone. Everything was covered in blood; I didn't know where he had been hurt so terribly or what manner of wound could have possibly bled so much. But even more horrifying were the strange voices I'd often hear."

"Voices?" Xie Lian asked.

“Deep in the night, I could sometimes hear human voices coming from His Highness’s room. It sounded like a few people whispering and arguing, but it was always just him in there when I’d go in to check. His Highness stopped allowing me inside after it happened a few times.

“One night, I heard those strange voices again—but this time, I noticed that they sounded like my three missing friends! I thought that they might have returned in secret, but why would they hide from me? I couldn’t sit still anymore, so I got out of bed and ran into His Highness’s room.

“Strangely, there really was no one there besides His Highness, who was lying on the bed, still wearing his mask. I stood there and listened for a moment, and I heard the voices again—they seemed to be coming from His Highness.

“Or, more accurately, they were coming from under his mask.

“I crept to His Highness’s bedside. The closer I got, the more certain I was that the voices really were coming from beneath the mask. Was His Highness talking in his sleep? Could he have missed his friends so much that he’d learned to mimic their voices in his dreams?

“I hesitated for a long time, and while I waited there, His Highness did not move. I assumed he was asleep, so I gently removed his mask. And I saw what was beneath.”

Unconcealable terror flowed from the state preceptor’s eyes.

“My three friends. They had been the ones talking, not His Highness.

“His Highness’s face was mangled, covered in jagged gashes that had been inflicted by something sharp, his flesh mangled and smeared with half-dried blood. And there were three more faces growing on his own, mouths moving, opening and closing—they were *their* faces!"

Xie Lian shuddered. "He…threw the three vassals who left him into the Kiln?!"

The state preceptor didn't answer. He was completely submerged in the enduring terror the scene still evoked in his heart.

"Those faces hadn't seen light in a long time," he said. "Even the moonlight was painful to them. When I removed the mask, they seemed shocked; they squinted and stopped talking. But after a moment, when they saw it was me, they began…to call my name.

"I was completely stunned. Earlier, I said that I'd never seen anything more horrific than millions of people plummeting from the skies and burning alive in a sea of fire, but the scene before my eyes at that moment was a million times worse!

"My hand shook nonstop as it held the mask; I probably would've dropped it on the floor and woken His Highness if I hadn't been petrified from head to toe, frozen in place. Meanwhile, those three faces seemed anxious to tell me something; the movement of their mouths grew even more erratic. But they still suppressed their voices, like they were afraid to wake His Highness.

"I was disgusted and terrified when I saw them, but I couldn't help but be curious what they wanted to tell me. So I held my breath, bent down, and leaned close to His Highness's face to listen.

"Coming so close, I could smell the thick stench of blood and rot that the medicinal herbs couldn't conceal. I heard them say, 'Quickly! Run away! His Highness has gone mad!'

“As it turned out, the other three had still been worried even after they left, so they returned in secret to speak to His Highness. But when they found him, he was herding a crowd of people toward the volcano’s peak. That was when they found out that His Highness had never abandoned the idea of living sacrifices. Seized by shock and rage, they attempted to stop him and began to fight with him. Yet unexpectedly, he savagely killed them and threw them into the Kiln along with the rest!

“The ordinary citizens were of course burnt to dust and ash as soon as they were thrown in. But the three of them were cultivators, and they had been murdered by His Highness—their resentment and attachment to the world was deeply profound. Their souls took his body as their host and grew as lesions on his body, venting their rage and berating him constantly in the hope of stopping him from pursuing his terrible endeavors.

“My horror and confusion mounted as I listened, and I didn’t know what to do. I truly couldn’t tell what was more terrifying—His Highness or those three abominations on his face!

“Right then, I felt a hand rest on my head. I stiffened. With great apprehension, I looked up and saw His Highness.

“I don’t know when he woke up. He and the three faces on his face, a total of four sets of eyes, were all staring at me! The expressions of those human faces became even more exaggerated, and as they twisted, they tore at the gashes on his face, causing fresh rivulets of blood to pour down.

“He stared at me for a long, long time. And then, he sighed and asked, ‘Didn’t I tell you not to come in here?’

“All at once, I understood his recent abnormal behavior. When he discovered those three creatures growing upon him, His Highness hadn’t been able to accept it. He couldn’t tolerate his inhuman, demonic reflection in the mirror, so he smashed all of them. The blood was from his attempts to slice them off with blades; the stench of rot was from his wounds, which would not heal. But no matter how many times he gouged them from his flesh, they always grew back!”

The state preceptor covered half of his face, his pupils shrinking violently.

“I…fell to my knees at his bedside. His Highness slowly sat up on the bed and said, ‘Don’t be afraid. This happened to them because they betrayed me. As long as you don’t do the same, I will treat you as I always have. As long as you are my loyal servant, nothing will change.’

“But how could I not be afraid?! And how could nothing change? Everything already had!

“His Highness is very smart. He’d never needed to change his behavior based on people’s expressions before his banishment, but he had learned to observe them and do so since. He guessed what I was thinking and asked me slowly, ‘Are you leaving too, then?’

“To be honest, I didn’t know. If he had only sacrificed those ‘degenerates’ he once spoke of, perhaps I could’ve pretended nothing had happened—I did say that I would have understood. But he had killed our best friends and thrown them into the Kiln with his own hands. Now we only had each other! This really was…madness. I…couldn’t accept it.

“And then His Highness murmured to himself, ‘It’s all right. I expected that. No one would stay now that I’ve become something like this. I can manage on my own. I understand now—I’ve always been alone! I don’t need anyone!’

“His expression turned savage, and he seized me by the neck with one hand and began to strangle me. He stared at me unblinkingly as he mumbled to himself over and over, ‘I can manage on my own. All alone, alone, alone, alone, alone, alone, alone. I don’t need anyone, I don’t need anyone, I don’t need anyone, I don’t need anyone…’

“His Highness has incredible strength. If he had really wanted to kill me, my neck would’ve snapped in an instant before I could even make a sound. But I didn’t die immediately. The moment he started to act out, my three friends began to scream on his face—they’d done something to him, and the pain in his head made him start screaming as well. I was also screaming. The five of us were all screaming wildly, yelling like madmen, like we had all gone crazy. His Highness gripped his head with one hand as the other strangled me harder. My vision was growing dark, I couldn’t hold on much longer, but then…I saw something beneath his pillow.

“It was a sword. He always hid it there when he slept; it was a habit he had developed during banishment. I caught hold of the hilt and yanked it out; the blade shimmered with chilling light. His Highness burst out laughing, his eyes blood red as he asked me, ‘Are you going to kill me too? Come! Stab me, quick! Stab me right in the heart! You can add to the count! We can see who’ll be the last left standing—you lot, or me!’

“Of course I didn’t stab him. I only flashed the blade in front of him and cried with everything I had, ‘Your Highness! Your Highness! Please come back! Look at yourself! Look at what you’ve become!’

“He had smashed all the mirrors, and it had been a long time since he’d seen his own reflection. The blade was sharp and bright; it reflected his appearance, and he saw his own face.

“He was stunned by the sight of himself. The grip of His Highness’s hand around my neck did not slacken, but he stared and stared. After staring for who knows how long, a line of tears suddenly streamed from one eye.

“When I saw his tears, I couldn’t help but cry as well. That reflection on the blade—such ugliness! Just a glance had disgusted me, so why did I force him to look? Why did I remind him that he was such an ugly creature now? I couldn’t bear it, and the sword fell from my hand and clattered to the floor.

“In the end, His Highness heaved me away and said, ‘Get lost.’ And I did, crawling and stumbling as I fled.”

Having listened to that whole story in one go, the held breath in Xie Lian’s throat finally released.

The state preceptor also lowered his hands. “I ran as far as I could and escaped the Kingdom of Wuyong. And it wasn’t long before the volcano erupted once again. This time, the entire kingdom was completely buried, and almost no one survived. An entire country gone, just like that.

“I escaped the calamity, but I never heard any news of His Highness again. It was as if he’d been buried along with the Kingdom of Wuyong.

“I’ve traveled to the heavens, and I’ve also cultivated on my own, so I have some achievements to my name. I maintained the state of my body and drifted aimlessly throughout the Mortal Realm. I had served His Highness since we were both young, and I didn’t know what to do now that I couldn’t any longer. His Highness was gone, and my three friends were dead. I created three empty-shelled fakes and made them speak in my friends' voices to keep me company—and to play cards sometimes."

Hearing "empty-shelled fakes," Xie Lian's expression grew solemn.

"My magic improved over the years, so I later instilled the skills of my three friends into the fakes," the state preceptor continued.

"Were they the other three state preceptors?" Xie Lian asked softly.

No wonder he had always found those three so strange; they never acted on their own and never socialized with him one-on-one. Apparently, they had been little more than puppets, and would be exposed as such if they left the chief state preceptor's side.

"The very same. I suppose you are also my friends' disciple," the state preceptor replied. "Alas, my creations were a pale reflection of the real thing—I could only instill the barest portion of their true strength into the fakes, so they couldn't teach you much. And he has long since destroyed the three fakes that kept me company for so long.

"The heavenly dynasty changed after another century or two, and all the heavenly officials of the past faded away. Gradually, a new batch of heavenly officials replaced them. However, none of that was any of my business; I was just living, shamelessly cheating death.

"Until one day, in some kingdom, a crown prince was born under the Ominous Star. That was you—the crown prince of the Kingdom of Xianle."

Here it was at last. Xie Lian's hands, resting on his thighs, clenched slightly.

The state preceptor sat cross-legged and hugged his arms as he spoke. "I thought it was quite the coincidence, maybe even fate. But in truth, it wasn't really all that remarkable—many, many years had passed since

Wuyong’s destruction, so of course there’d be one or two more examples over the passage of centuries. But even so, driven by a feeling I didn’t understand, I made up a random new name and became the State Preceptor of Xianle.”

I knew that name was made up… Xie Lian thought.

“No offense to your Xianle,” the state preceptor said. “But muddling my way into the state preceptor position was much too easy for me. There was only one problem: people always assume ‘a man without a beard is incapable’—that those who look young are inexperienced and incompetent and should be disregarded. I knew I might not pass if I went to the interview with my current face, so I changed my appearance to add ten or twenty years, and sure enough, I quickly got the position. But being state preceptor meant I had to speak directly to the officials of the Heavenly Realm.

“And thus, I came face-to-face with Jun Wu.

“Although he looked very different from the Highness I remembered, I knew him too well. I had my suspicions after only exchanging words a few times. But they were still only suspicions—and even if I suspected him, I didn’t want him to know that.

“He had become someone else completely, and the lesions on his face had also vanished. I thought that must mean that my three friends’ resentment had dispersed, and if that was the case, there was no need to bring up ancient history and disrupt this peace. So wasn’t it fine if we both pretended not to recognize each other?”

“I would have likely done the same, had I been in your position,” Xie Lian said.

"But we couldn't pretend forever," the state preceptor said. "Because we both saw you. Your Highness, by now you must have guessed why I had such high hopes for you—you're very much like him. I hoped you would become the god he once wanted to be and do what he couldn't. You could use your perfection to remedy our regrets."

Hua Cheng, however, said flatly, "You were wrong from the start. They're not alike at all."

The state preceptor gave him a look. "Of course *you'd* say that they aren't similar now, but they were very much alike back then. The problem was, they were *too much* alike."

He turned to Xie Lian again.

"I wasn't too pleased when you saved the small child who fell from the city wall during the God-Pleasing ceremony. It wasn't just because the incident stopped the ceremony, it was also because it was too conspicuous. You had caught Jun Wu's attention.

"Jun Wu started talking to me about you. He was very interested in you, and every time we spoke about you, I could tell that something wasn't quite right. But I could also tell that he genuinely liked you; it was the delight of finding a suitable good sprout. He always wanted to appoint you to the heavens to serve as an official in his palace, but every time he brought it up, I used all sorts of reasons to urge him not to do so."

Xie Lian didn't want to believe that Jun Wu's affection toward him had been fake, but when he heard the state preceptor confirm that it was sincere, the feelings it brought up were complicated. It was difficult to describe.

"The turning point was Yinian Bridge," the state preceptor said.

At that, Xie Lian snapped back to attention.

“Do you still remember the ghost at the bridge?” the state preceptor asked.

“That was the catalyst of my ascension. Of course I remember,” Xie Lian replied quietly.

“When you ran into that ghost, I already sensed that something was wrong,” the state preceptor said. “It was haunting a broken bridge in the barren wild, clad in armor that had been shattered and torn by the countless weapons that pierced its perpetually blood-soaked body. Its feet burned with the flames of hell, and it left fiery, bloody footprints in its wake. Furthermore, those three questions it asked you… All of that made me very concerned, worried even, though I couldn’t quite put my finger on what was wrong. And because you ascended so quickly after defeating the ghost at the bridge, I didn’t have a chance to figure it out.

“Thankfully, Jun Wu’s attitude toward you was as good as always after you ascended; he granted you favors and thought very highly of you, like nothing had changed. So I told myself not to overthink things.

“After that came the great drought of Xianle, the rebellion of Yong’an, and…the appearance of that creature, White No-Face.”

Xie Lian held his breath and hung on to every word.

“I said as much before, but I initially had no idea what that creature truly was,” the state preceptor explained. “Even as Human Face Disease broke out, I only had suspicions. Parasitic vengeful spirits aren’t anything new; they’d just never been so widespread. I was also feeling resentful of the Law of Heaven at that point, so I thought White No-Face had been born of nature as heaven’s punishment for you. But in light of many, many other things, as you encountered that creature again and again, and the epidemic spiraled more and more out of control, I was forced to consider the worst-case scenario.”

“Many, many other things?” Xie Lian asked. “Like what? What do you mean?”

“The family of three who died at the gates of the royal capital of Xianle,” the state preceptor replied.

Xie Lian stopped breathing. “That…was…?”

“I examined their corpses afterward,” the state preceptor said. “I discovered they weren’t human at all; they were empty-shelled fakes.”

“But empty-shelled fakes are hollow!” Xie Lian exclaimed. “They don’t have organs and can’t bleed!”

“There was no need for organs,” the state preceptor said. “A person’s innards would be damaged by falling from such a height, so stuffing some mushed flesh into their bellies and pouring in some blood-like fluid would suffice. One of my three friends had been an expert in fashioning such unusual crafts; he was the original designer of the technique for creating empty-shelled fakes and taught it only to us. The method to make such things wasn’t as widely known back then, and since my friends were dead, who was the only person other than me capable of making such realistic fakes?”

Xie Lian hung his head. His pupils had shrunk to pinpricks.

The family of three who died before the gates of the royal capital of Xianle was a direct catalyst of the war. Yet those lives hadn’t been real at all—they were nothing but an elaborate trick!

“Then…why didn’t you tell me at the time?” Xie Lian asked.

“I didn’t dare to,” the state preceptor said. “Considering your personality back then, wouldn’t you have charged right up there for vengeance if I told you the truth of the matter? That wouldn’t have saved you or Xianle; it would have only hastened your annihilation. Besides, even without those three empty shells, sooner or later there would have been…”

Sooner or later, there would have been some other incident that sparked war—like that missing dog in the capital.

“Later, you were defeated, as was Xianle. I could hold myself back no longer. I first sent everyone at the Royal Holy Temple away, then I requested his grace inside the Palace of Divine Might. I unmasked him then and there.”

This was the meeting that Jun Wu had mentioned before—their encounter eight hundred years ago.

“I had many questions for him, but he wouldn’t confirm or deny anything,” the state preceptor said. “Finally, I asked him, ‘Your Highness, what exactly do you want?’

“And he finally answered me. He said that he wanted you to become his perfect heir—if anyone in the world could understand him completely, it was you. Once he succeeded, you would never betray him!

“I understood what he was planning. We started fighting with our fists in the heat of the argument. I have no fighting skill whatsoever—I would die without a doubt in a physical altercation, and he could crush me without lifting a finger. But suddenly, his expression changed drastically, and he covered his face. I was quite shocked. And only then did I notice that the three lesions had surfaced again!

"As it turned out, they hadn't vanished at all; he had been suppressing them with his spiritual power! But they had managed to emerge somehow—perhaps it was because his emotions were running high or because of me! Just like that, my three friends had returned to stir up a riot. His expression was terrifying as an agonizing headache shot through him. I once again used that chance to run away.

"I started drifting in the Mortal Realm once more, but this time I had to stay undercover. I began to wonder what had become of the former Kingdom of Wuyong. I returned to the area to take a look, but I never expected to happen upon another great discovery. For some reason, the land where the former Kingdom of Wuyong once stood was sealed off completely, isolated from the outside world. And after wandering for a long time in the sealed domain, I ran into my three friends again."

"Were they the three mountain spirits—Old Age, Sickness, and Death?" Xie Lian asked.

"Correct," the state preceptor replied. "The Kiln devoured their bodies, and the dust of their incinerated bones mixed with the volcanic ash, which was then blown out with subsequent eruptions. The residue built up over time, layer upon layer. Now that a millennium had passed, it had formed three large mountains, each containing a part of their souls.

"It took me a long time to find a way to communicate with my friends who were now mountain spirits, but once I succeeded, I learned many things. For example, the heavenly officials of the previous dynasty hadn't faded away naturally—he had hunted them down and killed them all, one by one. He…massacred the entire Heavenly Court, leaving no one behind!

“After washing the Heavenly Realm with blood, he returned to the Mortal Realm once again and patiently waited for an opportune time. He changed his name, forged a new identity, became a ‘mortal,’ and then ‘ascended.’ All of the old heavenly officials were dead, so no one knew who he was or what he looked like before. The backstory of the ‘Heavenly Emperor’ that is known in the Mortal Realm—his background, his parables, his anecdotes, his appearance, his character…it’s all fake. It’s all an intricate lie he fabricated!

“This Heavenly Capital is a new Heavenly Realm he created single-handedly, and it is under his absolute control. He mixed the ashes of the previous dynasty’s heavenly officials into the foundation of this city so he could trample and step on them every single day. There might be someone beneath your feet right now.”

“…”

“Currently, he is the most exalted martial god of the Heavenly Realm,” the state preceptor continued. “He looks glorious and scintillating on the surface, but an infinite darkness is suppressed deep within his heart. Resentment, pain, anger, hatred…he must release those poisonous emotions to maintain his internal balance, lest he go berserk and slaughter everyone around him. That is the only way he is able to uphold his position as the ruler of all three realms.

“The former Kingdom of Wuyong had become hell, and the Kiln had been glutted with countless living souls and the souls of three former heavenly officials—it now recognized him as its master. He regularly releases his dark emotions into the Kiln, using the millions of Wuyong souls within as kindling to stoke the flames of hell and forge many malicious things.”

“The method to forge those malicious things is different from the process of creating a supreme, right?” Xie Lian asked.

“Indeed,” the state preceptor replied. “Supremes came later, since he…changed the refining method.”

“What do you mean by that?” Xie Lian asked.

“The quality and quantity,” the state preceptor said. He gave Hua Cheng another look. “Both of you must already know that a supreme is only born once a century—once every several centuries, even. Only one, every time. They are extremely rare and immensely difficult to create. That being said, a supreme’s past life is an independent existence; the Kiln only provides an environment to expedite the process of their explosive birth. Those with the potential to be a supreme could become one anywhere—it would certainly happen sooner or later. In fact, the word ‘supreme’ was originally derived from the words ‘unrivaled’ and ‘pinnacle’;[4] it didn’t have any connection to whether one had trained inside the Kiln. Still, enduring the Kiln’s refining process would certainly make one into such an entity, since there aren’t many capable of such a feat. Haven’t there only been three up until now?”

Xie Lian stole a glance at Hua Cheng by his side—the man happened to be gazing back at him. Although he didn’t know why Xie Lian had looked at him, he smiled.

“However, the Kiln’s previous creations weren’t like that,” the state preceptor continued. “In the early days, he’d have a session every few years, and each time the results would be different—endless batches of dark beings poured from its depths. Perhaps that had something to do with his unstable emotions…it produced nothing but monsters forged from his hatred and resentment. There are probably a few familiar names among them—for example, the Reverend of Empty Words."

"The Reverend of Empty Words was born of the Kiln?!" Xie Lian exclaimed.

"Correct," the state preceptor replied. "Those creatures… Some have their own consciousness and break away from him; some don't and can be considered his clones. The Reverend of Empty Words had its own consciousness, and it even divided itself into many smaller clones after it left. My three friends guarded the borders of the Kingdom of Wuyong to prevent the creatures from leaving the domain, while I spent my years in the outside world searching for any that escaped and trying to fix the problems they caused."

Xie Lian recalled the state preceptor's strange change of attitude when he saw Shi Qingxuan. "Master! Lord Wind Master… The skilled fortune-telling master who told Shi Qingxuan's fortune back then, the one who told his family not to host feasts—was that you?"

"Duh," the state preceptor said. "What other fortune-telling master could be so skilled and accurate? Or so idle that a bowl of congee could pay for a session?"

"…"

"Initially, the Reverend of Empty Words had wanted to devour the young Shi Wudu," the state preceptor said. "But Shi Wudu—that little bastard was too vicious, too difficult to deal with even at such a young age. Nothing could get to him, and he had no fear; his fate was so tyrannical that it couldn't be swallowed. If the creature had tried to take a bite, it would only shatter its teeth into a bloody mess. And so it could only turn to his ordinary little brother with a fate of wealth. Although it didn’t manage to sink its fangs into either of them in the end, it also didn’t suffer any losses—after all, it caused so much grief to the two siblings that they couldn’t live in peace, and it eventually bit someone whose fate was originally godhood. It really bothers me that I didn’t manage to kill that thing dead.”

“It’s already been killed dead,” Hua Cheng said.

“Devoured by He Xuan, right?” the state preceptor said. “I heard. I was going to watch over the Shi siblings until everything blew over, but the Kiln was about to open its gates once more; I couldn’t follow them for long before I had to leave. And things were already a mess when I got back. Shi Wudu had turned to wickedness and was causing such chaos—it was completely out of hand! It gave me such a headache that even if I wanted to care, I couldn’t at that point.”

It really did spiral into something that couldn’t be fixed even if he’d had the mind to help.

The state preceptor added, “Truth be told, the Reverend of Empty Words wasn’t even a particularly powerful specimen among the Kiln’s monsters; it just liked to roam around and stir up trouble. It can’t even be ranked on the same scale as the rest—it was a low-grade product through and through. But there were others, such as—”

“Such as the ghost at Yinian Bridge, the soul who died in battle?” Xie Lian said quietly.

The state preceptor sucked in a breath. “…Right. Otherwise, why do you think I’d say everything started because of your phrase? The bridge ghost was a dark clone he forged in the Kiln; it had to go on the haunt and kill every few years to vent its hatred. But you just had to defeat it!

“He could sense that someone had killed the ghost at the bridge, so he descended immediately to see who had managed it. And he saw you. And you…you just had to say that phrase to his face: ‘Body in the abyss, heart in paradise.’ That was an insane mockery of him, a grave provocation that stabbed him straight in the heart…

“That was the turning point of everything.”

Chapter 119:
The White Emperor Sets Deadly Tests in Secret

XIE LIAN CLENCHED his fists, his breathing going erratic.

One phrase.

It sounded so unbelievable, even laughable. But he couldn’t laugh at all.

“There’s more besides those monsters,” the state preceptor said. “Your Highness, do you remember that child you saved at the city wall? And how I was so shocked when you brought him to the Royal Holy Temple?”

Xie Lian snapped back to his senses and stole a glimpse at Hua Cheng. “…I remember. What disturbed you about him? You said he was—”

“A Star of Solitude!” the state preceptor exclaimed, then continued darkly, “At the time, I sensed that the child was heavily saturated with evil qi; its abundance was incredibly abnormal. I only learned the truth after I reunited with the other three in the kingdom’s domain—not only can the Kiln produce monsters, it can also curse. Just as you were able to disperse your own good fortune, the Kiln can also disperse its accumulated misfortune, releasing it to rampage across the land.

“The hour of the child’s birth was already extremely perilous: if his fate was fortunate, it would be the best of fortunes, but if it was unfortunate, it would be the worst of misfortunes. He probably absorbed all the misfortune the Kiln had dispersed on the day he was born, which was how he became so terrifying upon entering the world. Mount Taicang was almost razed to the ground when he set foot upon its soil!”

The longer Xie Lian listened, the more alarmed he became, and he slowly turned to gaze at Hua Cheng. They were clearly discussing Hua Cheng’s own affairs, but the man’s expression didn’t change; he simply gave Xie Lian a smile.

“Under normal circumstances, that child’s parents would have died early; if they didn’t, they would’ve scorned or abandoned him,” the state preceptor continued. “Better if they did die, as he would’ve otherwise suffered their endless abuse. He wouldn’t have lived past eighteen, and he would have caused those around him to die as well, to separate, to suffer misfortune, as if Disaster itself was reborn. That’s why I told you at the time to quickly get rid of him, to not get close—”

Xie Lian couldn’t listen a moment longer. “Master! Please…don’t say any more.”

The state preceptor nodded. “I’ll stop. I was just giving you an example of how scary the Kiln is.”

Xie Lian didn’t know what to say, but Hua Cheng chuckled and said, “It’s not as scary as it seems, but the state preceptor’s fortune-telling really is quite accurate.”

“…”

When Xie Lian realized that Hua Cheng likely hadn’t lived past eighteen, his fingers trembled. Hua Cheng reached out with one arm and gently covered Xie Lian’s chilly hands, palm to back. Although their skin was equally icy, there was warmth where their hands touched.

"He set many tests for you," the state preceptor said. "The Human Face Disease epidemic of Xianle was the first. By his judgment, you would've passed if you chose to unleash the plague upon Yong'an; he would not have banished you, and he even would have helped you cover it up. He would have made you into his trusted heir, one who would reach the top in your first step and defy the heavens in your second. But your answer was wrong.

"He should've given you another elaborate trial during your banishment, but you still didn't give him a satisfactory answer. And so you were immediately beaten back down the moment you ascended."

A pale, smiling mask appeared in Xie Lian's mind. After a pause, he said quietly, "That was actually my own request."

"Gege, trust me. Even if you didn't request it, he had thousands of ways to send you back down," Hua Cheng said.

"But he defeated White No-Face," Xie Lian said.

"Who didn't actually die," Hua Cheng noted.

"Then why go through all that trouble?" Xie Lian asked.

"Of course, White No-Face could've just killed you," the state preceptor said. "But killing you was not what *he* wanted. Just as I already said, he really likes you—he doesn't want you to die at all. He only wanted you to become the person he had been trying to forge you into."

"Killing you wouldn't achieve that end," Hua Cheng added. "You would never change if you had died in that state—and he'd be able to accept *that* even less. But White No-Face had no reason to let you off the hook so easily. What better way to solve this dilemma than to have the Heavenly Emperor descend to the Mortal Realm to vanquish evil and save you from the brink of death? Your trust and gratitude for him would only grow. But he still failed to change you twice. He must’ve been extremely vexed.”

“The second time you were banished, he had countless opportunities to ‘educate’ you as you drifted in the Mortal Realm, and to lie in wait until you changed your mind,” the state preceptor said. “Based on my observations, he calmed down during that time, but his calm was disrupted recently…by your third ascension.

“If you had become nothing but a puddle of rotten mud, then he wouldn’t have cared. But you… Even though you’ve fallen to such lows, even though you’ve completely ignored everything he planned for you, you were still able to ascend for the third time—and still the same as you always were, completely unchanged… I don’t know what was on his mind when he saw you again, but I’m certain he planned to set out more tests for you.”

“It’s obvious, seeing all that he’s done recently,” Hua Cheng said. “Gege, think back: what happened after you ascended for the third time?”

Xie Lian quickly pulled himself together, and after a moment of contemplation, he said, “The first incident was Mount Yujun, when I was dispatched to take down the female ghost Xuan Ji. I couldn’t find the Ghost Groom at first; it was the fetus spirit who guided me with a nursery rhyme halfway through. I assume he told it to do so. But I just thought he was helping me with the case.”

“Helping you finish the mission, that’s all,” Hua Cheng said. “The direct result was Xuan Ji’s arrest, but what about the indirect results?”

“…I stabbed the hornet’s nest that is General Pei’s old relationship drama and brought him a bit of trouble?” Xie Lian ventured.

"I suppose that could be considered a small test," the state preceptor said. "If you had known you'd offend Pei Ming, would you have managed the Ghost Groom case differently? For example, would you have secretly informed Pei Ming so he could suppress the affair, or let Xuan Ji continue to cause petty trouble in that remote place but kept it from getting out of hand—something like that?"

Xie Lian sweated. "Well… To be honest, it was a while before I learned that it had anything to do with General Pei. That ghost woman was taking hostages, and there were so many people present at the time. The arrow on the bow had to be loosed—there was no time to think about who might be offended."

"Then, gege, you had already made a decision," said Hua Cheng with a smile, and he continued to analyze the matter. "As for the second incident, an empty-shelled fake came to Puqi Shrine in the form of a cultivator and lured you to Banyue Pass. Let's temporarily skip the matter of who sent that fake. What consequences did that mission cause?"

"General Pei Junior was booted from heaven, and thus General Pei's right hand was severed," Xie Lian answered.

"Gege, your work in those two incidents helped him greatly weaken Pei Ming, and you also thoroughly offended Pei Ming himself," Hua Cheng said. "His involvement went completely undetected. You received all the backlash, but you still had to be grateful to him."

"…"

"If I'm not wrong, he's kept a close eye on you through the past eight hundred years," Hua Cheng added. "Gege, he probably also knows that you were once a state preceptor in Yong'an, and that you taught Lang Qianqiu, yet he still sent you two on a mission together. The way I see it, he must have done that with bad intentions."

"Wait a second," the state preceptor said, his surprise apparent. "Your Highness, you went to Yong'an and took up the position of state preceptor? You taught Lang Qianqiu?"

"Yeah…" Xie Lian replied.

"You were the State Preceptor Fangxin?!" the state preceptor asked.

"Mmm, yes… Is something the matter?" Xie Lian asked.

Xie Lian gave a brief account of his service, and the state preceptor replied, "He would definitely be furious with you if he knew about this."

"Gege, regarding the Reverend of Empty Words," Hua Cheng continued, "at first you didn't want to get involved in that case, but you were still pulled in—though thankfully not too deeply. Neither Black Water nor Shi Wudu dragged those hundreds of fishermen into the Heavenly Tribulation in the South Sea. If not those two, who is most capable of something like that?"

Only after each incident had been laid out before him did Xie Lian realize the truth—every step he'd taken since his return had been made under Jun Wu's close watch and guided by his hand.

Hua Cheng crossed his arms. "I'm assuming that he's doing this for two reasons. First, his sick mentality drives him to throw test after test at you to see what path you'll choose—endlessly hoping that you'll go down the one he paved for you. Second, he was probably using you as a sword to cut down other heavenly officials' power.

"The heavenly officials of the previous dynasty must've traumatized him deeply. Now he's hypervigilant and requires absolute control over everything—he tolerates no threats to his power or status and allows no heavenly officials to catch up to him. And I think…”

Xie Lian was also mulling over the same points. “Think what?”

“When Shi Wudu changed Shi Qingxuan’s fate, and when Black Water infiltrated the heavens in the name of investigation,” Hua Cheng said, “do you really think he didn’t suspect a thing?”

Xie Lian had been wondering about that as well. Could Jun Wu really have seen nothing from his seat on the highest throne? That was hardly plausible. He could directly examine every report and scroll that passed through Ling Wen’s hands, so was it truly possible that he never noticed the forgeries? The Water Master committed such a heinous crime and deceived nearly the entire world, but he lived peacefully for many years. He was conveniently only exposed when he started dominating the Upper Court.

“Perhaps he knew everything from the very start, but the Water Master didn’t threaten his status back then. So he made no move to expose him,” Hua Cheng continued. “Exposing the matter early on wouldn’t have necessarily worked to his advantage. A new Water Master would ascend if Shi Wudu was banished, and they might not have such an enormous transgression that could be used against them. I’d have been very displeased with Shi Wudu if I were Jun Wu, but I wouldn’t have needed to use my own hands if I wanted to get rid of him—all I’d need to do was wait. I would simply watch quietly as the Water Master grew more and more outrageous, arrogant, and fearless, and when he finally exhausted my tolerance, I’d just leak the fate-switching affair to Black Water.”

And Black Water would of course avenge himself and his deceased family.

Hua Cheng continued to explain, “As for him gathering millions of ghosts in the Kiln to birth a new supreme, it was likely in order to…”

Xie Lian came to his senses and finished for him. “…Create balance.”

“Yeah,” Hua Cheng said. “He was probably delighted to welcome the birth of a malicious supreme, one that would cause havoc in the Mortal Realm. As long as there are creatures making trouble, there will be people praying.”

And a god’s spiritual power was only made stronger by the prayers of their devotees!

The state preceptor sighed. “The four of us set out to stop the gathering every time the Kiln opened, though we weren’t always successful. And this time, it’s even more… Things have gotten even more out of hand. He killed a few of those vengeful Wuyong spirits, but he sent the majority off with the Teleportation Array. And then he sent the rest of you away while he stayed behind to inspect and destroy some things. He assumed I would try to find you, so he rushed to the capital after taking care of Mount Tonglu, and sure enough, he captured me.

“Things couldn’t go on like this for much longer, I thought. The Kingdom of Wuyong’s existence had been rediscovered, and considering how cautious he is, it was most likely time for another change in heavenly dynasty. If you’d all continued to suspect nothing, sooner or later you would have been buried, serving as the Heavenly Capital’s foundation like the rest. But that little brat Feng Xin happened to bring Hongjing along, so I gave it my best shot. His spiritual power had grown so strong that Hongjing could no longer reflect the things on his face under normal circumstances, but since he had just battled the three mountain spirits, the lesions were tearing through again.

"I've pretty much covered everything. Do you have anything else you wanted to ask, Your Highness?"

Xie Lian was still thinking things over when Hua Cheng spoke up.

"I do. State Preceptor, do you still remember your Wuyong tongue?"

"The Kingdom of Wuyong has long been forgotten," said the state preceptor, "and no one uses its language anymore. My three friends and I have long since learned a new tongue. We still know the old language, but we rarely use it." He then confessed, "Nor do I really want to."

Xie Lian thought back and realized that the state preceptor hadn't been referring to him when he told the mountain spirit, *"His Highness is beyond saving,"* and *"He hasn't fully awakened yet."* He'd been talking about White No-Face, who had possessed Lang Ying and was wandering around on a killing spree to gather enough power to recover.

As for the corpse-eating rats that spewed human words, there'd been a match among the possible candidates who could have infected him with their memories—or two matches, in fact: Jun Wu *and* White No-Face. And the fake skins of Feng Xin and Mu Qing within the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods must have been simple for White No-Face to create, because Jun Wu knew them both so well!

"He…seemed to be leading me to believe that I was the Crown Prince of Wuyong, or that I'm a part of his soul," Xie Lian said.

"Of course he was," the state preceptor replied. "Wuyong's existence could no longer be hidden, and anyone who learned of the Crown Prince of Xianle and the Crown Prince of Wuyong would think that they were very alike. It was the perfect solution, a way to make it all lead back to you. And if you began to doubt yourself—to doubt your true heart, your actions, and your objectives—and began to harbor the idea that ‘I am the Crown Prince of Wuyong,’ it became much more likely that you’d repeat his fate.

“He was leading you to purposely make you walk the same road he did. It wasn’t that the two of you were somehow destined to have similar paths, he…simply couldn’t tolerate the idea that a soul so similar to his own *could* have a different path.”

A long while later, Hua Cheng spoke up. “I told you—they aren’t alike at all.”

The state preceptor had finally had enough and turned to him. “You. Young man. What’s wrong with you?”

“…?” Hua Cheng had no response.

Xie Lian was startled and thought, *What's wrong?*

The state preceptor rolled up his sleeves and lectured Hua Cheng with a somber, heavy tone.

"I've been wanting to say this for a while. You, young man—what's with that insincere smile? Don't think you can be impolite toward me just because you're a Supreme Ghost King. Supreme Ghost Kings might be rare, but do you know how old I am? An elder of such exceptional age is far rarer."

"…" Hua Cheng cocked an eyebrow.

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. "Ah, Master, it's not that San Lang is impolite. He's just…" *He's just too used to giving people that fake smile!*

The state preceptor gestured to Hua Cheng that he should stay where he was, then pulled Xie Lian aside and spoke to him sternly. "Your Highness, I saw it."

"Huh?" Xie Lian asked. "What did you see?"

"On top of that giant divine statue," the state preceptor said.

The giant divine statue? What happened on top of it? Xie Lian thought for a bit before suddenly, his brain buzzed.

He had borrowed spiritual power!

Xie Lian started hacking and coughing. "No… I was just borrowing spiritual power… No, actually, it wasn't just that. Anyway, I was just…"

The state preceptor's voice grew even more somber and earnest. "Your Highness, what's going on? Is it because I was too strict? Or, since you've cultivated for so long and avoided women, have you…changed your ways?"

"…That's not why!" exclaimed Xie Lian, waving wildly.

The state preceptor was doubtful. "Then…could it be…a trait from birth? Well…I never noticed. Hmm… Well, *this* part of you certainly isn't like him…"

"Wait?! That's not it either!" Xie Lian cried.

The state preceptor puffed out a sigh. "Don't worry, Your Highness, I'm not going to lecture you. I won't guide you on a topic in which I myself am not an expert. Besides, you've already been through so much and gotten through it in one piece, so what's there left to worry about? Men or women, it doesn't matter, as long as you're happy."

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead until it turned red, and he said in a small voice, "Yes…I'm very happy."

Still, the state preceptor added with glum confusion, "But…after being single for eight hundred years, how did you end up with a Supreme Ghost King?"

Xie Lian was taken aback.

"I'm not saying you've got bad taste," the state preceptor continued. "It's *not* bad; I'm sure mature ladies and young maidens alike are fond of that type too. But a Supreme Ghost King is trouble, I'm telling you. Your Highness, you've got to think these things through, all right? Once somebody like that clings onto you, you can forget about ever ditching them."

"Uh, Master, hold on—"

"I'm absolutely correct about this. By the looks of this Crimson Rain Sought Flower, his fortune must be so awful that it's twisted to hell and back—not just bad, *worse* than bad. His evil qi is so suffocating that it assaults the mind, practically like—"

Hua Cheng was right behind them and said lazily, "Practically like the Star of Solitude, right?"

Xie Lian had been desperately trying to stop the state preceptor from talking, but with no success. Covering his face, he silently shuffled behind Hua Cheng, who smiled and circled an arm around him as he raised his brows.

"My smile is certainly quite insincere, but to say to a man's face that he's the Star of Solitude, disaster reborn, the worst of misfortunes, the child of parents who are better off dead, and unable to live past eighteen—that's not very nice, is it?"

The state preceptor was confused at first, then slowly, his eyes widened. "You…are…?"

Chapter 120:
Meet the Ghost King, Hiding in the Palace of Crown Prince

THIS TIME, Hua Cheng's smile wasn't fake—on the contrary, it was very bright indeed. Stunned, the state preceptor pointed at him.

"You, you, you… It's you? That child—you are that child?!"

Both his finger and his voice were practically shaking. Hua Cheng wore a cheerful expression, and although he made no reply, the truth was clearly written on his face: *"That's right! I'm the one who almost burned down Mount Taicang—the Star of Solitude himself!"*

The state preceptor turned to Xie Lian and demanded, "Your Highness…what's going on? Can you explain?"

Xie Lian spread his hands open and shrugged, giving a shy smile. "It's…just as you see."

The state preceptor was utterly gobsmacked. He slapped the back of his right hand into his left palm a few dozen times. It was a moment before he could finally speak.

"You see! You see, you see, you see, I told you so! I told you Supreme Ghost Kings shouldn't be so carelessly provoked. He's been coming on to you from such a young age—such ghastly persistence! It's been, what, eight hundred years? *Eight hundred years!* He's been stalking you for eight hundred years! Scary, too scary! My fortune-telling is just *too* accurate!"

"Please, Master… Please, drop it. Let's not talk about this anymore…" Xie Lian pleaded.

You haven't even seen the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods and all its divine statues, Xie Lian thought to himself. If the state preceptor *had* seen it, he'd probably decide Hua Cheng was a savage beast or fierce flood, some mad demon or sick ghost—and then he'd tuck Xie Lian under his arm and run away.

The state preceptor still hadn't recovered from his shock. "No, he's too terrifying. What the heck? Such obsession—and so calculating! Your Highness, you must be absolutely careful; you'll be easily taken advantage of like this. Be careful of his lies!"

"San Lang wouldn't do anything like that," Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng dryly confirmed the statement. "My Lord[5] thinks too much. I'd lie to anyone but His Highness."

The state preceptor leaned over and began to argue with Hua Cheng. "You sly boy! You're taking advantage of the fact that His Highness isn't very experienced in this aspect of life—don't think I can't tell! Why don't you tell me right now, to my face, how to lend spiritual power? How many ways can it be lent, and how do *you* lend it? What did you tell His Highness?"

"…"

Hua Cheng made no comment.

Xie Lian started yelping and making random noises. "Ha ha ha ha… All right, all right! Let it go, the page has already been flipped; as long as it's been lent, it doesn't matter how, right?! Ha ha ha, it's all the same, all the same!"

If they continued to discuss this, he was going to start flapping like a drowning duck being boiled in a pot. Xie Lian quickly changed the subject, turning serious.

“Let’s discuss more crucial matters. Right now, he’s locked us up, but he hasn’t made a move yet. What is he planning?”

“Probably arranging another test for you,” Hua Cheng said.

“What kind of test, though?” Xie Lian wondered.

“That’s hard to say,” the state preceptor said. “To be honest, anything is possible. But Your Highness, don’t change the subject! I’m giving you advice. Don’t allow lust to confound your mind, and don’t be deceived by pretty words. I say he’s—”

“Gege, someone’s coming,” Hua Cheng interrupted, his tone dark.

“Don’t think you can lie to me,” the state preceptor said. “Unlike His Highness, I’m not so easily deceived.”

But Xie Lian said, “Master, he’s not lying to you—someone really is coming! Let’s hide!”

As he spoke, he and Hua Cheng lightly pushed off with their feet and leapt onto the ceiling beam to hide together. It wasn’t long before frantic footsteps could be heard outside the chamber, and shortly after that, a man kicked the door open, cackling with pleasure.

“WAH HA HA HA HA HA, THE HEAVENLY REALM IS NOTHING! In the end, it still submits to the heel of this ancestor’s boot!”

“…”

“…”

“…”

All three were struck speechless at the sound of that voice.

A man in green robes swaggered into the room—it was, of course, Qi Rong, who they hadn't seen in ages! Not only had Jun Wu locked up all the heavenly officials, he'd apparently also let loose all the nefarious creatures sealed in heaven's prison. Those creatures could now freely roam the streets of the Heavenly Capital and rampage across the realm—reason was standing on its head. It was bizarre to see!

The state preceptor also hadn't expected the interloper would be Qi Rong, and he stiffened at the sight of him. Qi Rong pointed at him and began to shout.

"Friggin' State Preceptor! Friggin' old man, friggin' ancient fossil! Heh! Remember how you looked down on me and refused me as a disciple? What do you think about me now? It's a slap in the face, right? But that's just karma—this is the ending you deserve!"

A timid little head peeked out from behind him—it was Guzi. This was probably the first time he'd ever entered such a sumptuous building, and he stared at his surroundings with wide eyes. He seemed to secretly want to touch the jade brick flooring but didn't dare do it.

"My good son, do you see?" Qi Rong said, proud and happy. "This here is the Heavenly Realm, and now it's your daddy's domain!"

"Really, Dad?" Guzi said, awe in his voice. "This place is so big…"

"Of course!" Qi Rong exclaimed. "If you don't believe me, watch—*PTOOEY, PTOOEY, PTOOEY!* I spit wherever I please, and who'd dare tell me off?!"

The state preceptor had no words.

Guzi hesitated for a moment, but he still whispered, "Dad, it's not good to spit on the ground. It's so beautiful and clean here—you'll dirty the floor."

Qi Rong was stumped.

The state preceptor couldn't resist commenting either. "Take a look at yourself! What are you teaching that child? You're how old now, and you still don't know how to be a good role model? Even that boy is more mature than you!"

As he was lectured from both sides, Qi Rong's embarrassment turned into anger, and he jumped to his feet spewing a barrage of curses. "FRIGGIN' OLD MAN, WHAT THE HELL DO YOU KNOW?! Pretending to be some elder! I won't allow *either* of you to discipline me! And *you*! How dare you speak to your daddy like that, you ungrateful brat!"

After the scolding, Guzi didn't dare make any further comments. When Qi Rong was done yelling, he guiltily wiped at the spit on the floor with his feet, then dragged Guzi out of the room while pretending that nothing had happened, cursing and cussing as he went. Before he left, however, he drew an enormous scrawl of graffiti upon the most conspicuous wall of the Palace of Ling Wen: *"GREEN GHOST QI RONG #1 GHOST KING OF THE 3 REALMS WAS HERE!"*

After Qi Rong exited the Palace of Ling Wen, the blue budaoweng doll Xie Lian had tucked away in his sleeve slipped out on its own and fell to the ground. It landed in front of the wall that had been defaced with those enormous characters and the spit mark Qi Rong had messily wiped away. The budaoweng spun wildly, like it was losing its mind with rage. Once he and Hua Cheng leapt down from their hiding spot, Xie Lian picked it back up.

The state preceptor shook his head. “Prince Xiao Jing truly is… unrelentingly immature. He’s shown no growth whatsoever, and his taste is still incredibly bad.”

Hua Cheng glanced at the wall, too lazy to even show disdain. He simply said one word: “Hideous.”

The state preceptor finally found a reason to agree with him. He tucked his hands into his sleeves as he stated, “Extremely hideous. I have never seen anything uglier in all my years…aside from that hellish mess of entrance couplets on the doors of the Gambler’s Den in Ghost City. *That* handwriting is over ten times worse than this!”

Hua Cheng had no comment.

Xie Lian, on the other hand, was desperately trying to laugh off the state preceptor’s words. “Ha ha ha ha ha… Master, I’ve seen the entrance couplets you’re talking about, but I thought the handwriting was pretty good. It had lots of unique style—I rather liked it.”

The state preceptor was puzzled. “Your Highness, how could you say that? You were taught calligraphy by world-class experts—how do you not know the difference between beautiful and hideous? That handwriting is the absolute worst in all three realms; not even the best teachers could salvage it. What exactly do you like about it? Has your taste fallen apart too?”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Master! Please don’t say any more!” Xie Lian begged.

“Gege,” Hua Cheng suddenly called. “Jun Wu is making a move. He’s heading to the Palace of Xianle right now, probably to seek you out.”

The state preceptor jolted. “What?! Your Highness, you must hurry back! Crimson Rain Sought Flower, hide yourself well—you must absolutely not let him discover that you two have met up. My three friends' mountain bodies are trapped within the domain of Mount Tonglu, but they are currently trying to break free. No matter what course of action we take, we'll have a greater chance of success once they're out. Remember, do not act recklessly!"

Naturally, Xie Lian knew that. After they bid the state preceptor farewell, the pair left the Palace of Ling Wen and stealthily rushed through the capital, evading countless guards and nefarious creatures along the way. They were still four blocks away from the Palace of Xianle when Hua Cheng spoke up again.

"Gege, he's only one block from the Palace of Xianle."

Alarmed, Xie Lian touched the silver butterfly that was monitoring the situation from afar. A scene flashed before his eyes. Sure enough, there was Jun Wu, walking alone with his hands clasped behind his back—and he would reach the gates of the Palace of Xianle in a mere hundred more steps.

What should they do?! At this rate, they'd get there after Jun Wu, or even cross paths on the way. And worse, the guards at the Palace of Xianle's gates were still petrified by Hua Cheng's spell!

Suddenly, the gates of the divine palace behind Jun Wu opened. The person standing there greeted him.

"My Lord."

Jun Wu paused in his step and looked back. "Rain Master? What is it?"

The one who stopped him was indeed the Rain Master. There were no nefarious creatures to be seen near the Rain Master's residence, only the heavenly guards—probably because Jun Wu had instructed irrelevant individuals to steer far clear.

“My Lord, there is something I have forgotten to give you,” she said very politely. “Might I ask you to step inside for a moment?”

Jun Wu inclined his head. “Very well.”

And sure enough, he turned back around. Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief.

“Thank goodness for Lord Rain Master!”

He decided then and there that he’d burn eighteen tall incense sticks for the Rain Master once he returned to the Mortal Realm!

Seizing this opportunity, they dashed the last four blocks and reached the Palace of Xianle before Jun Wu. As they entered, Hua Cheng released the spell on the guards at the gates with a casual wave of one hand. Although they were confused for a moment, they did not notice anything amiss.

Xie Lian sprinted back to the inner chambers, but his expression changed again before he had a chance to sigh in relief—for the guards at the gates had entered to announce Jun Wu’s arrival.

He’d come so quickly!

It seemed the Rain Master hadn’t stopped him for long. The two exchanged a look. Without a single word needing to pass between them, Hua Cheng turned and hid himself behind the curtains while Xie Lian hopped into the bed to pretend to be asleep, his back facing the door. Just as he pulled the covers up, Jun Wu entered.

He slowly walked over to the table and was quiet for a moment before he spoke. “Xianle, are you resting?”

Xie Lian didn’t respond. He heard Jun Wu sit down and set something he’d been carrying onto the table before pouring himself a cup of tea.

“Xianle, I made you stay here for your own good,” he said gently. “There are many things that would have ended much better if you had listened to me.”

Xie Lian didn’t move; he still lay there facing away from him. His mind was like a raging sea as he remembered all the state preceptor had told him. What expression could he possibly wear if he was forced to look directly at Jun Wu, who—for the moment—was still being kind and gentle?

Behind him, Jun Wu continued languidly, “But not only did you sneak outside to play, you even brought someone back with you and hid them in your room. It seems you really do not listen to me anymore.”

A chill shot down Xie Lian’s back, and all his hair stood on end. The terror he felt seemed so similar to what the state preceptor must have experienced on the night he snuck into Jun Wu’s room and removed his mask.

He heard Jun Wu rise from his seat at the table and slowly approach where Xie Lian lay beneath the sheets…and where Hua Cheng was standing behind the curtains next to the bed!

Xie Lian had hidden Fangxin beneath the pillow when he leapt into bed, and he grasped its hilt tightly with one hand. Although he lay in wait for the right moment, he doubted any such opportunity would come.

Unexpectedly, Jun Wu didn’t go for the curtains, but instead came to the bedside and lifted the sheets covering Xie Lian’s body. A chill washed over Xie Lian, and he shot upright, staring hard at Jun Wu.

Jun Wu eyed him, calculating. “That robe doesn’t suit you,” he said mildly.

“…”

Only then did Xie Lian remember—he was still wearing the Brocade Immortal! It had turned into a white cultivation robe, but of course Jun Wu wouldn’t be fooled so easily. He watched Xie Lian for a moment, then sighed.

“You simply will not listen to me. You went out to cause trouble again, didn’t you?”

As Xie Lian watched him, uncertain, his gaze briefly fell on the table. A gift box had been placed there, already unwrapped to display its contents: a few cabbages, several potatoes, and some white radishes.

“…”

So when the Rain Master stopped Jun Wu and said she’d forgotten to give him something, she meant souvenirs from Yushi Country…

Behind Jun Wu, Hua Cheng silently moved an edge of the curtain to reveal his face. His gaze cut across the space behind Jun Wu and met Xie Lian’s. He seemed to be deliberating on whether to make a move then and there, and his hand crept to rest on the hilt of the silver scimitar at his waist—however, Xie Lian didn’t think it was the right moment. He shook his head, an action easily disguised as a sign that he didn’t want to talk to Jun Wu.

“Where did you hide Ling Wen?” Jun Wu asked.

He couldn’t hand over Ling Wen, of course. The moment he saw her, he wouldn’t even need to ask her what had happened; her budaoweng doll form would be a dead giveaway that Hua Cheng had infiltrated the Heavenly Capital. But Xie Lian couldn’t help but wonder—did Jun Wu really not realize that Hua Cheng was the one who’d snuck in?

“Xianle, your expression is telling me that something is wrong,” Jun Wu continued. “What is it? Are you hiding something or someone else in addition to the Brocade Immortal?”

In fact, Xie Lian’s expression hadn’t changed at all. Jun Wu simply knew him very well.

Silently exchanging a look with Hua Cheng behind Jun Wu’s back, Xie Lian steadied himself. “Think whatever you want,” he said coolly. “No one can leave here, and there’s nothing I can do about that. Do whatever you please, your elderliness.”

Then he lay down again, pulling the covers over his head. As for Jun Wu, he turned around and started pacing leisurely within the chamber. Although he took his time searching the room, he found nothing. Jun Wu pondered the matter for a moment, and sure enough, he turned toward the curtains and reached for them.

When he lifted the curtain, there was nothing there.

Pausing for a moment, Jun Wu dropped the curtain and returned to the table anew. As for Xie Lian, who was still lying in bed, his reeling heart still hadn’t relaxed—because Hua Cheng was right next to him under the covers and their faces were pressed extremely close. Xie Lian’s heart was pounding thunderously loud, his entire body tense and taut.

Hua Cheng smiled, then mouthed soundlessly, *“Don’t be afraid, Your Highness.”*

When Jun Wu turned away, Hua Cheng had moved the curtains aside. After Jun Wu walked past him, he’d effortlessly slipped out and silently darted to Xie Lian’s bedside. Xie Lian had yanked him onto the bed and stuffed him under the covers, and Jun Wu had turned around again just as

Hua Cheng rolled beneath the sheets. The timing was seamless, the positioning was intricate, and Jun Wu saw nothing but a pile of messy blankets.

Finally, Jun Wu said, “Xianle, get out of bed. You are not really sleeping. Get up and come with me.”

Xie Lian actually did want to laze around in bed and not get up, but he was afraid that Jun Wu would come over again to lift the covers. He could only hide his arm beneath the pillow to secret away the blue budaoweng inside his sleeve, then drag himself out of bed.

As Jun Wu had already left the bedchamber, Xie Lian looked back and saw that Hua Cheng had gotten out of the bed. His gaze was dark, and he was clearly ready to come to Xie Lian’s side, but Xie Lian hurriedly waved to signal that he mustn’t expose himself—that everything was fine.

Jun Wu called out to him from outside the room. “What is wrong? Why are you dallying? Is there something keeping you in bed?”

Xie Lian dashed back and grabbed the box of souvenirs on the table, then went back out, closing the door behind him. He grabbed a carrot from the box and took a loud bite.

“It’s nothing,” Xie Lian said tonelessly. “Am I not allowed to be hungry?”

Jun Wu glanced at the thing in his hand. “If you like those, I have more,” he said warmly. “I will send you some another time.”

Xie Lian couldn’t think of a response to that.

After they had walked for a few streets, they could hear a ruckus from afar and the sound of cackling.

“HA HA HA HA HA HA HA! Feng Xin, you dog! This ghost king is trampling your palace right now, and what’re you gonna do about it?! C’mon! C’mon! Come fight me! HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!”

It was Qi Rong again!

As they approached, they could see that he had brutally vandalized all the golden palaces nearby; that giant, ugly *“QI RONG WAS HERE”* was scrawled everywhere. Qi Rong even hopped onto the roof and pulled up the tiles to better holler smugly at the heavenly officials inside. By his side was Guzi, who looked greatly troubled—he clearly wanted to speak up but was holding himself back.

Although Qi Rong was jumping and stomping all over the Palace of Nan Yang, Feng Xin’s troubled thoughts left him with no mind to pay attention to him. Qi Rong got bored after yelling for a while, so he went over to Mu Qing’s palace and repeated the process. The only response he received to his antics was Mu Qing rolling his eyes a few times, and Qi Rong stomped all over the roof in anger before he hopped to the roof of Quan Yizhen’s palace. Yet before he could even open his mouth, a divine statue carved with a head of copious curls burst out of the palace and collided with Qi Rong, the impact sending him flying off the roof. He plummeted to the ground headfirst and landed with a crash. An enraged Quan Yizhen had used his own divine statue as a weapon, hurling it directly at Qi Rong!

Guzi was stupefied. As he clung to the edge of the roof, he cried, “Dad! Are you all right?!”

Qi Rong was furious. “QUAN YIZHEN, YOU SHAMELESS DIMWIT! You dare use such despicable means to ambush me?!”

Although he hesitated for a moment, Guzi still asked with confusion, “Dad, how was that a despicable ambush?”

After all, Quan Yizhen had thrown that divine statue at him very openly.

“STUPID SON! Anything he does is despicable if he manages to win against me!” Qi Rong yelled. “How could he possibly win against this ancestor without resorting to tricks?!”

“Oh…” Guzi replied.

“…”

Regardless of circumstances, Qi Rong was still his little cousin, so Xie Lian couldn’t help but cover his face in embarrassment. Jun Wu paused in his step.

“Green Ghost.”

When Qi Rong heard Jun Wu’s voice, his face stiffened. He crawled to his feet and looked over cautiously—he seemed very wary of Jun Wu. When they looked, both “father” and “son” naturally saw Xie Lian as well.

“Scrap Cultivator-gege!” Guzi exclaimed happily.

Qi Rong, on the other hand, only snorted derisively. “My! Who’s this? If it ain’t Cousin Crown Prince?!”

Xie Lian didn’t acknowledge him in the slightest, which set him off. He came over to harass him, circling Xie Lian and jeering.

“You were so high and mighty before—when you looked down on me with two mountains backing you up. So why do you look like a lost dog now?”

Xie Lian was puzzled. Two mountains? He abruptly realized that one was Hua Cheng, and the other was Jun Wu. A myriad of emotions stirred in him as he glanced at Jun Wu, who was standing in front of him.

He suddenly recalled that night a long time ago, when he had asked Hua Cheng what he thought Jun Wu was like. At the time, he'd said that Jun Wu must really hate Xie Lian.

"Oh ho ho!" Qi Rong cackled. "You only managed to ambush me that time because you used that fucker Hua Cheng as backup. But before I could settle the score with you, someone else got to you first! What good karma!"

"Green Ghost, stop talking nonsense to Xianle," Jun Wu said, unperturbed. "You can let your subordinates out now."

Although Qi Rong freely cursed Jun Wu behind his back in the past, he glumly tucked in his tail when the man himself was present. While his expression showed how unwilling he truly was, he hopped onto the roof without another word, picked Guzi up, and scurried off to do his assigned errands.

Jun Wu turned to Xie Lian. "Let's go."

Xie Lian looked at the route Jun Wu was leading him down and wondered, *We're heading toward…Qi Rong's subordinates? Could that mean…?*

After a while, they turned a corner, and a martial god's magnificent palace stood before them.

The Palace of Ming Guang!

There were already angry roars and incoherent shouts coming from inside. Startled, Xie Lian stopped caring about following Jun Wu and ran inside ahead of him.

It certainly was a mess in there!

Pei Ming's face was ashen. This was because Xuan Ji had coiled herself in firm, constricting loops around him like a viper, like she was desperate to tie herself to him in knots. With her hair loose, her face savage, and her eyes wide and glaring, she looked like she was mere moments away from tearing out Pei Ming's throat with her teeth—but, at the same time, she herself was being choked and pulled away by Banyue. A broken sword was about to pierce Pei Ming's neck, stayed only by Pei Xiu dragging it backward and preventing it from following through.

Kemo's fists were in mid-swing behind Banyue and Pei Xiu, but the ashen-faced Pei Ming dragged him down to interrupt the blow. Had he not, Kemo's enormous, hammer-like fists would've surely squashed Pei Xiu and Banyue flat. Xuan Ji and Rong Guang screamed and tore at each other as they argued about who would have the privilege of choking or stabbing Pei Ming to death.

"Get lost! Pei Ming's shit life is mine, mine, *it's all mine!*" Xuan Ji shrieked.

Rong Guang, who was possessing the Mingguang sword, yelled back, "*You* get lost! What an ignorant wench! There are at least eight hundred women who Pei Ming doesn't want anymore, if not a thousand—and do you really think you rank high on that list?! *I'm the one who gets to end Pei Ming's shit life!*"

Veins popped violently on Pei Ming's forehead. "You're…both…insane! Get lost, all of you!"

Xie Lian felt endless sympathy. This was a prime example of the misfortune borne of extreme popularity. "…General Pei, hang on!"

Before he could move to rescue the unfortunate general, a hand rested on his shoulder.

“Xianle, you cannot think I brought you here to do good deeds,” Jun Wu said from behind him.

From the middle of their bruising brawl, Pei Ming and company also noticed them.

“General Hua!” Banyue called out joyously.

With that hand pressing down on him, Xie Lian couldn’t move a muscle. “Then why *did* you bring me here?”

His hand still on Xie Lian’s shoulder, Jun Wu pushed him along into the palace. The tangled mob slumped to the ground the moment they entered like their strength had been sucked away; only one or two could still flop around.

“Ming Guang,” Jun Wu said.

Now that Xuan Ji wasn’t strangling him anymore, Pei Ming’s complexion was back to normal. He sighed in relief.

“My Lord, really…thank you for that.”

While his tone wasn’t sarcastic, the words themselves were laced with irony. Jun Wu didn’t seem to mind, though, and he smiled.

“No need to thank me so early, Ming Guang. I came here to get your help with something.”

“What is it?” Pei Ming asked.

“In the royal capital, in the lower realm,” Jun Wu began, “there is a human array.”

Xie Lian had known he was plotting something!

“Break it and I will reinstate you as the Martial God of the North,” Jun Wu finished, his tone flat and indifferent.

Pei Ming glanced at Xie Lian and chuckled dryly. “Isn’t Crimson Rain Sought Flower guarding the array? I may not be able to break it by force alone.”

“Of course you cannot break it by force,” Jun Wu said. “But I did not say you had to use such methods.”

It would actually be very easy for Pei Ming to break the array, as Shi Qingxuan would surely let him in as long as he pretended to be there to help. After he entered, he could ruin it in an instant if he left the circle without warning! And Hua Cheng wouldn’t be able to fix it—because he wasn’t actually guarding the royal capital right now!

Chapter 121:
Coiling and Encircling, Silver Butterflies and Blessings Lanterns Shield

"GENERAL PEI…that array is defending the capital against the vengeful spirits that poured out of the Kiln," Xie Lian explained. "There will be a third outbreak of Human Face Disease if it's broken, and that would…"

A third outbreak would bring disaster to the world. It might annihilate all living things.

Pei Ming rubbed his nose. "Let me verify one thing. My Lord… is giving me no other choice, right?"

"Of course I am providing a choice," Jun Wu said. "If you descend, I will let you go. If you do not, I will let *them* go."

Who was "them"? Xuan Ji, Rong Guang, and Kemo!

A green, hungry glint flashed in the three ghosts' eyes. It was easy to imagine what they would do to Pei Ming once they were set loose: strangle him to death, scratch him to death, stab him to death, punch him to death—choose one or all of the above.

"Little Pei is also here," Jun Wu added. "I presume you think very highly of your descendant—after all, when he was discovered luring people to their deaths at Banyue Pass, you were willing to cover up his crimes to keep him in the heavens. You even planned to pin the blame on another."

This reminder made Rong Guang's grievances well up anew. He furiously cursed Pei Ming for being a terrible friend and valuing his great-great-great-great grandson over his brothers-in-arms.

Xuan Ji grumbled and griped about her own grievances from the side. Pei Ming endured all the demonic noise swarming around his head, and after much thought, he sighed.

“Will My Lord allow me to think more on this?”

“My patience is limited, so I don’t care to give you too much time,” Jun Wu said.

As soon as he spoke, delight appeared on the three ghosts’ faces—they could move now! And in an instant, they pounced!

The gates of the Palace of Ming Guang closed. Xie Lian could hear someone’s tortured screams from inside and the sound of ripping and tearing.

His face dropped, and he cried, “General Pei! Banyue!”

Although he wanted to go back inside to check on them, Jun Wu’s hand on his shoulder dragged him away and steered him to the other end of the street. Xie Lian kept looking back, but he had no say where he went.

“What are you planning?!” he cried angrily.

“Next,” Jun Wu said.

Next? What was next? They walked for another stretch before stopping once more. Xie Lian’s breath nearly stopped when he saw.

Lang Qianqiu’s Palace of Tai Hua!

Qi Rong sauntered over from the opposite end of the street with Guzi tucked under his arm. He looked refreshed and rejuvenated—and very satisfied with himself for having trampled all the major divine palaces.

“Why did you call me over?” he asked.

Jun Wu had actually summoned Qi Rong to the Palace of Tai Hua. A sense of foreboding seized Xie Lian.

"There's nothing to concern yourself with here! Leave now!" he scolded.

Qi Rong's face fell, but before he could snap at Xie Lian, Jun Wu gave an order.

"Go inside."

And just as quickly, Qi Rong was smiling smugly once more. "Hee hee! Your words don't matter 'round these parts!"

And then he strutted inside the Palace of Tai Hua with his head raised and his spirits high.

Lang Qianqiu was pacing back and forth inside the palace with his hands behind his back, his face dark and gloomy. When he saw that Xie Lian and Jun Wu had come, he demanded suspiciously, "What are you doing here?" He then saw Qi Rong behind them, and his face changed color in an instant.

"You!" he cried angrily.

Guzi shrank away in the face of his angry roar, but Qi Rong certainly wasn't afraid of him right now. He sat down cross-legged on a chair outside the hall, jiggling one leg, so cocky that he was drunk on it.

"Nothing to fear, my good son! That's right, *it's me!* Lang Qianqiu, haven't you been hunting me down hoping to kill me for so long? And yet you still fell into my clutches in the end!"

Lang Qianqiu was outraged. Veins popped on his forehead and on the backs of his hands, yet he was locked within his palace and couldn't take a single step outside. He turned to Xie Lian furiously.

“What the hell are you doing?! Did you bring him here to show him off?!”

“No!” Xie Lian cried. “Calm down!”

“I am calm!” Lang Qianqiu exclaimed. “I don’t even know what’s going on!”

Jun Wu issued the terms of his order. “Tai Hua, descend and break the human array in the royal capital. Do so and I will hand over your enemy, the Green Ghost Qi Rong, for you to manage.”

Qi Rong laughed wildly. “HA HA HA HA HA! LANG QIANQIU, YOU YONG’AN DUMBASS—*huh?* What did you say? Hand me over to him? What do you mean?!”

He’d cackled for a good while before he processed Jun Wu’s words, but when he did, he leapt directly to his feet. What a joke—hand him over to Lang Qianqiu? He’d murdered the entire Lang clan; Lang Qianqiu would slaughter him!

Jun Wu didn’t acknowledge him whatsoever, just continued to speak leisurely. “Otherwise, I will hand you over to be managed by the Green Ghost Qi Rong, and another life can be added to the list of Yong’an royalty who died by his hand.”

Lang Qianqiu’s face was growing darker and more terrifying, and Qi Rong cried, “Wait!”

Xie Lian couldn’t take this anymore. “Are you mad?!” he cried. “Why are you forcing them to make such choices? What are you trying to show me?!”

Lang Qianqiu had been hunting Qi Rong down to kill him, and considering Qi Rong’s character, of course he’d pounce on an opportunity to eliminate Lang Qianqiu first! But if Lang Qianqiu really did choose to set out and break the human array…well, Xie Lian definitely did not want to see that!

“If you do not want to watch them make such decisions, then why not take their place?” Jun Wu asked.

“What?” Xie Lian gaped.

“Xianle, all of this is the result of your stubborn caprice,” Jun Wu said. “If you had followed my direction from the start, they would not have to face these choices now.”

“Are you saying that this is my fault?” Xie Lian was so angry his voice was shaking. “Why must you force all of this on me?!”

“Do you hate me?” Jun Wu asked. “Hatred alone is pointless. Defeat me if you have what it takes—but do you?”

Xie Lian clenched his fists tight, his knuckles cracking.

“Naturally, you do not at the moment,” Jun Wu continued. “But you might become capable of the feat if you break the human array. If you break it, I will remove those two shackles on your body.”

“…”

The two cursed shackles had sealed his power for over eight hundred years. What would happen if he was released from their fetters?

Anxiety ramping high, Qi Rong stared cautiously into the Palace of Tai Hua, scared that Lang Qianqiu would choose to break the array at any moment and he’d be left in the lurch, doomed to be snuffed out. Lang Qianqiu’s eyes darted rapidly between Xie Lian and Qi Rong.

Suddenly, Jun Wu’s hand on Xie Lian’s shoulder loosened.

Xie Lian jolted and whipped his head back. Jun Wu’s expression was calm and cold, his chin slightly lowered to inspect the curved silver blade that was hooked around his neck.

Eming’s blade.

Behind him, Hua Cheng’s eyes flashed with animosity. “Move your hand,” he said frostily.

“San Lang!” Xie Lian cried.

Hua Cheng had followed after all.

Jun Wu breathed in, then smiled at Xie Lian. “Xianle, you dared to have an affair with the ghost king right under my nose. What audacity.”

Hua Cheng scoffed. “Why don’t you take a look in the mirror? Do you have the right to say anything on the subject?”

Qi Rong hadn’t even settled in his chair before he leapt up again, his face changing into a rainbow of terrified colors. “D-D-D-DOG…HUA CHENG?! How did you get up here?!”

Xie Lian unsheathed Fangxin from where it hung at his waist and swung, cutting through the barrier that was locking Lang Qianqiu inside. “Qianqiu, run!”

However, Lang Qianqiu was still burning with rage, and he charged toward Qi Rong to seize him. He grabbed the greatsword on his back, looking like he was going to chop Qi Rong into half a dozen pieces—but

Guzi hopped down from Qi Rong's shoulders and opened his arms in front of him to shield him.

"Don't…don't kill my dad!" he cried out to Lang Qianqiu.

"Move! Your dad is possessed! And he's not even your dad!" Lang Qianqiu shouted back at him.

Seizing the opportunity, Qi Rong flipped out of his grip and leapt away, catching Guzi as he did. "DON'T COME ANY CLOSER! I'm warning you, don't come near me! Do it and I'll chomp this kid to death! I'll rip him open and devour his guts right in front of you!"

Lang Qianqiu stopped, then yelled angrily, "Isn't he your son? He protected you, and you still treat him as nothing but a shield? You despicable, dirty ghost trash!"

Caught in Qi Rong's grip, Guzi was blinking in confusion.

"A cheap son! I'll just sire another one!" Qi Rong countered.

"If that's the case…" Jun Wu said lightly.

Hearing his tone, Xie Lian instinctively sensed danger. Sure enough, he soon heard surprised shouting from outside the palace.

"Fire! There's a fire!"

"Everything's burning up!"

Xie Lian rushed out of the Palace of Tai Hua to look. Night was falling, but the Heavenly Capital's skies were flaming red above a sea of fire. Many palaces had already been overtaken by the blaze!

Whirling back around, Xie Lian demanded, "What are you doing, setting fire to the Heavenly Capital?! All the heavenly officials are still locked inside their palaces on your orders!"

They'd also had their spiritual powers sealed—if this situation was allowed to continue, wouldn't they all burn to death in their own palaces?

"It's not like he cares whether they're alive or dead," Hua Cheng said.

Lang Qianqiu was shocked too, and Qi Rong seized the opportunity. He tucked Guzi under his arm and fled, crawling and scuttling as he went.

"Stop!" Lang Qianqiu cried.

As if Qi Rong would do any such thing!

"Qianqiu!" Xie Lian yelled. "Go free the other heavenly officials first!"

"Yes, Master!" Lang Qianqiu answered on reflex.

They both paused. Lang Qianqiu gave Xie Lian a look before dashing out.

As he withdrew Eming's blade, Hua Cheng summoned a whirling storm of silver butterflies. The thousand-strong swarm wrapped Jun Wu in a chrysalis. Hua Cheng grabbed Xie Lian's hand and pulled.

"Let's go!"

The silver butterflies wouldn't hold Jun Wu for long. The two ran off into the street and saw that Lang Qianqiu had already knocked down a great number of guards. Many of the heavenly officials had been released from their palaces and were pouring onto the Grand Avenue of Divine Might. Their panic was palpable.

"Why is everything burning? Who set a fire?!"

"It's not a normal fire—it can't be extinguished!"

From a distance, they could still hear Qi Rong howling as he fled. “FUCK, FUCK, FUCK! Jun Wu, that motherfucker, he’s gone crazy; this ancestor is still here! He’s really fucking nuts if he’s setting his own domain on fire!”

Feng Xin had come out of the Palace of Nan Yang and seemed to be looking for someone as he stood on the main street.

From one side, Mu Qing asked, “How do we leave?”

But there was no way to leave!

“Can we fly?”

“Everyone’s injured and their spiritual power is still restricted. We can’t fly out of here…”

So even though everyone had been released from their palaces, they were still trapped in the sea of fire that had overtaken the Heavenly Capital!

Just then, a wild tremor shook the ground, and the officials began to panic. “What’s going on?! An earthquake?!”

“How can that be?” Lang Qianqiu shouted. “This is the Heavenly Capital—it’s a city in the sky! How can there be earthquakes?”

“Then what—”

Any further comments died in the officials’ throats. A long moment later, they began to point at something.

“What is that thing…?” someone mumbled.

Beneath the firelit sky, a giant head had appeared at the end of the long main avenue of the Heavenly Capital. It was staring at the hundreds of heavenly officials on the street.

The head was truly enormous, many times the size of a golden palace. And furthermore, it was smiling—although it was a very peaceful and benevolent smile, it looked quite sinister against the backdrop of the endlessly dark night and bloodred flames.

"…"

Someone clutched at their head. "Am I…hallucinating?"

"His Highness is so big!"

It was *the* giant divine statue—and it had flown to the heavens!

Xie Lian was dumbfounded. Wasn't that divine statue supposed to be lying dormant in Mount Tonglu territory? And it shouldn't have been able to fly without him at the controls. How had it gotten here without his commands or any spiritual power?

Then Xie Lian noticed that the giant divine statue was surrounded by glittering, sparkling lights, stark against the blackness of the night. Looking closer, he discovered that the light wasn't coming from the statue itself but from the millions of silver butterflies and Blessings Lanterns that wreathed it from head to toe.

The silver butterflies and Blessings Lanterns had flown it to the heavens!

Chapter 122:
Turning the World Upside Down, Battling the Fiery Demonic Fortress in the Sky

THE GIANT DIVINE STATUE rose higher and higher under the gaze of countless stunned, dumbfounded eyes. Xie Lian saw that it was in perfect condition, completely undamaged—there was no trace of the broken leg White No-Face had inflicted.

“San Lang, you fixed it?” he exclaimed with delight.

Hua Cheng flashed a smile. “I couldn’t possibly come to the heavens to pick gege up empty-handed. Let’s go!”

Xie Lian nodded. “Everyone, hurry and get on!”

But that was when the crowd of heavenly officials finally saw that Hua Cheng was the one standing beside him. They almost fell to their knees.

“Your Highness, the man next to you is…?!”

The furrow between Feng Xin’s brows was growing deeper and deeper in distress, and he finally started calling out, “Jian Lan! Jian Lan!”

No one responded. Lang Qianqiu spotted Qi Rong sneaking about and hiding in corners—he was about to go seize him when, with a great rumbling *boom*, the Palace of Tai Hua collapsed as he passed by, like something inside had exploded. When the heavenly officials turned in shock to look, they saw a figure standing there amidst the rubble and raging fire—head lowered and utterly silent.

Jun Wu had broken free of the silver chrysalis.

As expected, the silver butterflies couldn’t stop him for long!

Qi Rong hastily scuttled behind Jun Wu, then shouted cockily at the crowd, “GARBAGE! TRASH, ALL OF YOU! Come over here if you’ve got what it takes!”

Only he was still foolish enough to approach, ignorant of his own impending demise—none of the heavenly officials even dared to speak!

Black aura billowed and white light blinded, both colors radiating from the body of the martial god clad in white, ever-changing and unpredictable. The heavenly officials found this “Jun Wu” infinitely foreign, and they stared at him, not even daring to breathe too loudly. Jun Wu stared at Xie Lian intently and slowly walked toward the gathering of gods. With every step, the flames of war sparked beneath his feet, lively little flames that were spreading madly in all directions until they became a raging inferno that stormed through the heavens. Just like the ghost at the bridge.

The flames caught on to Qi Rong. Howling, he fled quickly with Guzi in his arms. With a face covered in soot and Yin Yu’s corpse on his back, Quan Yizhen stood in the middle of the main avenue; when he saw Jun Wu, his eyes were also set alight by blazing fires of rage. He didn’t even put the body down before stalking toward him, and Xie Lian had to pull him back. Getting close to Jun Wu right now would be courting death!

Another wave of silver butterflies shot forth. Xie Lian used this chance to shout, “Hurry! Don’t just stand there!”

The heavenly officials hesitated for a moment, then, finally, they acknowledged the order one by one. Like an army of black ants climbing aboard, hundreds of heavenly officials leapt onto the giant divine statue and crowded its shoulders and chest. When there were no more places to stand, they had to grab on to the hem of its robes.

The giant divine statue couldn’t depend on the Blessings Lanterns and silver butterflies to fly, but Xie Lian couldn’t make a move on Hua Cheng with so many people around. But adversity breeds ingenuity—Xie Lian grabbed a random heavenly official and yanked them over to block the others’ view while he cupped Hua Cheng’s face and brought him in for a deep kiss.

Time passed, and Xie Lian's whole body was filled with spiritual power. The heavenly official who had been used as a screen had gone completely stiff.

"What are you two doing behind my back?!" he cried in shock.

Countless eyes focused on them. Only then did Xie Lian discover that the random official he had used to block the view was Lang Qianqiu.

What a sin, what a sin! This child mustn't witness such things, Xie Lian repented in his mind.

"We've done nothing! Nothing you should see!" he exclaimed. Then he turned around and shouted at the divine statue, *"Fly!"*

Upon hearing his command, the divine statue came to life. Its squinted eyes flashed open, and the smile on its face deepened. The silver butterflies and Blessings Lanterns scattered in an instant, but it still floated steadily in the sky. Its long hair, sleeves, and robes seemed to flutter in the wind.

It was flying!

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng leapt aboard and stood upon the jade crown platform on the divine statue's head.

"Everyone keep steady! Hang on tight!" Xie Lian shouted.

The body of the divine statue sank as he spoke, then it shot forward with rumbling force, bringing wild, shrieking gales along with it!

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng stood at the highest point of the divine statue and carried the countless heavenly officials away from the Heavenly Capital. Many of the officials had left years of savings behind in the capital, so they kept looking back, pounding their chests and stamping their feet in dejection and despair.

Once he had regained some calm, Xie Lian remembered that there hadn’t been time to take a headcount amidst all the chaos. He had no idea whether Pei Ming and the others had met an unfortunate fate. Worried, he searched the crowd below for the few figures he was familiar with.

“Master! General Pei! Are you here?”

“I’m here!” the state preceptor’s voice replied from a distance.

Only then did Xie Lian relax, just a little.

Just then, someone cried out. “It’s gaining on us! *It’s gaining on us!*”

Pursuit was expected. And sure enough, something huge and bright red was chasing the giant divine statue, glowing with life-stealing light.

It was the Heavenly Capital itself!

The Heavenly Capital was normally wreathed in auspicious clouds. But now it was burning with the flames of war—it had transformed into a demonic, fiery fortress!

“It’s the Emperor…” someone said in terror. “The Emperor is moving the Heavenly Capital… He’s going to annihilate us all…”

“He’s going to catch up!”

“Not so fast!” Xie Lian shouted.

His hand seals changed rapidly, and the giant divine statue’s eyes flashed. The wind whipping around the heavenly officials’ ears howled harder and faster, and the red light chasing them fell away into the distance. The divine statue was now flying even faster!

But the red light didn't give up so easily. With a great rumbling noise, its speed suddenly exploded—it was now even closer than before, and many of the heavenly officials cried out in alarm. At this distance, they could almost see the figure standing within the Heavenly Capital!

Meanwhile, the people of the Mortal Realm had no idea what was happening. When laughing children at play saw a white light shoot across the sky with a red light in pursuit, their jaws dropped and they clapped in delight.

"Lights! So pretty!"

Xie Lian knew this couldn't go on for much longer. They had to speed up once more, but he was feeling slightly dizzy—he had been piloting the statue for so long, after all, and on a single breath. Hua Cheng helped him up, but before the two could exchange words, they heard the state preceptor yelling from below.

"What are you all standing around for?! A bunch of heavenly officials need to rely on the spiritual power of a ghost king to make their escape? Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?!"

Some heavenly officials didn't appreciate his tone and shot back, "Who are you? What right do you have to lecture us?"

"It doesn't matter who I am!" the state preceptor countered. "I was in the Upper Court when you were playing in a sandbox somewhere! Hurry up and place your precious little hands on this divine statue, and give it all the spiritual power you have; that's the only way it'll fly faster! That is, unless you're waiting for him to catch up? Are you lot so used to watching from the sidelines that you've forgotten your lives are on the line? Do you need me to remind you?"

That seemed to knock some sense into the heavenly officials—they had actually forgotten they could lend their support that way! With a chorus of ashamed exclamations, they hurriedly got to work pressing their hands to the divine statue.

"Your Highness, I will, uh, give you a hand!"

"Ah, me too, then…"

"There's not much…but I'll do what I can."

Seven or eight hundred hands and feet poured spiritual power into the divine statue, filling it once more, and Xie Lian was reenergized. With a loud rumble, the divine statue powered up once again and left the red light far, far behind!

The heavenly officials sighed deeply in relief, each wiping away the sweat on their brows.

Xie Lian was doing the same when Hua Cheng suddenly said, "Gege, go lower."

Since he had spoken up, Xie Lian didn't ask why; he immediately dipped downward and broke through the layers of pitch-black clouds only to find further darkness—not even a bit of light or civilization could be seen. The heavenly officials were agitated.

"What…what is this place? Why is it so dark? It's quite frightening."

"Your Highness, why did we come down here?"

"I don't think we should stay long…"

Hua Cheng said firmly, "We will stay here, and we will not move. Let's wait."

The giant divine statue thus floated in midair. “Mmm… What are we waiting for?” Xie Lian asked.

“We’re waiting for him to catch up so we can make a stand,” Hua Cheng whispered back.

As soon as he spoke, a streak of red light broke through the blackened clouds and the blazing Heavenly Capital sank down.

The heavenly officials watched the red light’s approach with unblinking eyes, chills running down their spines. They all began shouting questions at Xie Lian.

“Your Highness, why aren’t we leaving?!”

“You can’t be thinking of fighting him head-on? We’ve got no chance of winning!”

“He’s gone stupid again! I just knew it—that guy loves being stupid! It’s been hundreds of years, and it’s always been like—hey, who kicked me?!”

“Me,” the state preceptor said. “Say one more word and I’ll push you off instead.”

“Who *are* you?!”

The divine statue might have been huge, but the Heavenly Capital was even more majestic in stature; it would definitely crush the statue in a head-on battle. However, Xie Lian had complete trust in Hua Cheng’s judgment, so he stayed silent and focused. Thus, one stone man and one city confronted each other in the cold night sky. When the red light was less than a quarter of a kilometer away, Xie Lian felt something stirring down below.

When he looked down, he saw the darkness beneath his feet moving—splashing, rising, and folding in on itself. It was almost like…

Waves.

Suddenly, Xie Lian knew exactly where they were.

Some other heavenly officials had also noticed, and someone exclaimed in terror, “My heavens, this is…the Black Water Demon Lair! We’ve been brought to a ghost den!”

Just then, several sharp, white things broke through the darkness below and leapt into the air!

Four sets of eyes glowered at the fiery demonic fortress—huge, haunting green eyes like ghost fire lanterns. As if highly displeased by the rude intruder, the eyes’ owners let out long, malicious howls and whipped their giant tails back and forth, slapping at the surface of the sea and stirring up thousands of tall waves.

It was the four bone dragons!

They raised their heads, opened their jaws, and blasted the demonic fortress with torrents of water from their mouths. The enormous water guns blasted with such immense power that they could have torn through iron walls.

Xie Lian couldn’t help but reevaluate his initial impression. “The last time we saw them, they were a little… Ha ha, I didn’t think they were so ferocious.”

More and more giant skeletal monsters broke through the pitch-black surface of the sea, and fish sailed through the air with whooshing noises like they were catapulting boulders at the fortress.

The heavenly officials were completely confounded by the sight. Jun Wu was pursuing them with intent to kill, while Hua Cheng and Black Water seemed to be helping them. It made a bizarre scene.

The four bone dragons surrounded the demonic fortress and kept up their wild barrage, but it wasn’t terribly effective—mere water could hardly extinguish the raging flames of war. The fire only grew more and more furious after the fish bombardment, and it burned all the way down to the sea. The surface of the Black Water Demon Lair became a raging inferno; firelight danced wildly upon the water while wails and howls sounded from the abyssal depths.

Sweat rolled down Xie Lian’s forehead. “Is…is it okay…that we made such a mess of Black Water’s domain?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Hua Cheng said. “He owes me money. Fight however you wish.”

Xie Lian could only make a confused noise in response.

Suddenly, someone pointed ahead. “What… What is it doing?!”

Xie Lian turned to look, and his heart jolted when he saw.

The fiery demonic fortress that was once the Heavenly Capital was shaking in the sky, and a cacophony of cracking and snapping noises filled the air. Countless bits of flaming rubble rolled and tumbled into the water as the body of the fortress ponderously turned around.

The many divine palaces built upon the ground of the Heavenly Capital were moving and shifting—at first laid out flat, they were now realigning themselves vertically and dividing into sections. What was once a perfect fortress was breaking into seven or eight large pieces!

"Have we defeated it? Is it falling apart?" a heavenly official wondered.

"How could it be that easy?" Xie Lian said. "This is probably—"

Before he could finish, the broken pieces of the fortress's body began to rapidly reconstruct themselves, filling the air with the sound of stone grinding against stone. As the heavenly officials watched, their eyes grew larger and larger; some were even left with their mouths hanging wide open.

The fiery demonic fortress wasn't falling apart—it had broken into pieces to build itself anew.

And after reconstruction, it had become…a fiery giant!

The giant was roused from its slumber and stood tall in the air. Its body was almost entirely covered in shimmering golden palaces, as if it was wearing sturdy, solid armor. It had replaced the Heavenly Capital and was now facing off against Xie Lian's giant divine statue.

But face-to-face, Xie Lian's statue seemed delicate and small and even a little pitiful, like a child standing against an adult. The giant divine statue could easily be described as colossal, but the fiery giant dominated both Heaven and Earth. It was bigger by five or six times at least; it looked as though it could crush a fortress underfoot with a single step—it was so terrifying it made one's hair stand on end!

After its rebirth was entirely complete, the fiery giant slowly turned its head. A torrent of flame blew from its mouth and swept toward the four bone dragons. The wall of flame cut through the volley of water guns, and the four bone dragons dove back beneath the waves when they realized that things were going downhill. As for the giant, it landed upon the surface of the sea and advanced toward the huge divine statue, walking steadily upon the water as if it were land.

The Palace of Divine Might sat like a crown atop the giant's head, and Jun Wu radiated an oppressive aura from where he was enthroned within. Its presence was suffocating, and the heavenly officials cried out to Xie Lian.

"Your Highness, don't just stand there! Hurry and run away—we're dying here!"

"We can't win! There's no way we can win! Wake up, Your Highness, it's a million times bigger than you!"

However, Xie Lian responded, "We can't keep running away. Even if we can't win, running won't work much longer."

Although the heavenly officials were first taken aback, it soon dawned on them—indeed, they couldn't keep running. On the off chance Hua Cheng stopped providing spiritual power, the divine statue could not fly for long with their combined power alone; they would be exhausted far too quickly by the strain. In the end, they had to find somewhere to stand and fight.

And rather than luring the fiery giant somewhere populated, why not just take care of things here? There was not a single soul to be seen amidst the waves of the Black Water Demon Lair, so no mortals would be dragged into the fray!

Such considerations were proper for a heavenly official to have, but who wouldn't be terrified when facing off against such a menacing fiery giant with an endless abyss of pitch-black water below them? Still, no one wanted to be the first to demand that Xie Lian quickly take them somewhere with more people around.

Thus, Xie Lian said, “Everyone hang on tight—careful not to fall off! Everything sinks in the Black Water Demon Lair!”

The fiery giant lunged forward and reached out to grab the much smaller divine statue. As Xie Lian dodged and leapt with great agility and vigor, the heavenly officials holding on to the divine statue were flung around, flipping and toppling, sometimes rising, sometimes falling. It was both extremely distressing and extremely thrilling, and the sound of their screams traveled up and down with the divine statue. Very few martial gods had ever experienced a battle like this—never mind that most of the officials present weren’t martial gods and usually sat in their palaces all day.

Xie Lian heard Quan Yizhen yell, “You don’t have a weapon! You need a weapon!”

The heavenly officials finally couldn’t hold back any longer. “Yeah, Your Highness! It’s too hard to win if you don’t have a weapon!”

“I’m trying to think of what I can use!” Xie Lian shouted back.

Ruoye very excitedly twisted its body into loops and snuggled up to his cheek, but Xie Lian pushed it away.

“Thank you, but you won’t do—you’re too small!”

Hua Cheng spoke up. “If you need a weapon, there are options at hand. Use this for now.”

Xie Lian heard another round of shrieking howls. The four bone dragons that dove beneath the sea to evade the fiery giant’s flames poked their heads out again, surrounding the giant divine statue.

The heavenly officials couldn’t help but be alarmed. “What do they want?”

But they hadn’t surrounded them to launch an attack. Xie Lian watched as each dragon bit onto the tail of the next, and soon, the four long bone dragons had linked themselves together to form a single extremely long bone dragon!

The linked bone dragon leapt into the air and came flying over. Without thinking, Xie Lian raised his hand, and the giant divine statue caught it.

“This is…” Xie Lian murmured in wonder.

It was a Bone Dragon Whip! He could control it just like he controlled Ruoye, and it’d work just fine!

With a flick of his hand, the Bone Dragon Whip hurtled straight for the fiery giant’s head. The fiery giant raised its hand and caught the end, but the Bone Dragon Whip snapped itself in half and the divine statue simply took another step forward with shortened whip in hand and struck at the giant’s head once more. It seemed that the fiery giant had taken a painful hit, as it loosened its grip on the piece of bone dragon it had caught, which slithered back and relinked with the rest in Xie Lian’s hand.

The Bone Dragon Whip was exceedingly flexible and could break apart and reattach—sometimes break in half, sometimes half and then half again. It was a difficult weapon to defend against, especially coupled with the giant divine statue’s incredible agility.

The whirling winds had thoroughly tangled the heavenly officials’ hair and blown their sleeves into their faces, but still they provided commentary.

“I can’t believe His Highness can move like that!”

“I’ve only ever seen him collect junk! I can’t believe he really does come from a martial god background!”

“You can skip the ‘I can’t believe’ at the beginning of your sentences,” the state preceptor said. “And there’s no need to put so much emphasis on the junk collection either!”

“Uh, ha ha ha ha…” Xie Lian laughed awkwardly.

The incredibly long Bone Dragon Whip was like a steel chain blanched white, and the bones crackled as it tangled their opponent. The fiery demonic giant’s body began to fall, and the heavenly officials snapped back to attention.

“Quick, quick, quick, pull it into the sea!”

Below the midair battlefield lurked the Black Water Demon Lair—the water where everything sinks!

The giant divine statue gripped the Bone Dragon Whip, and Xie Lian gritted his teeth as he exerted more force. “Come on down!”

Sure enough, the fiery demonic giant sank a bit further. All the heavenly officials quickly pressed their hands and feet to the giant divine statue to transfer spiritual power again, chanting as they did, “Sink! Sink! Hurry and sink!”

As he listened to the chorus of voices shouting *“Sink!”* at Jun Wu, Xie Lian felt a subtle chill shake his heart. Sitting atop the giant divine statue, he looked at the Palace of Divine Might. Although he couldn’t see the expression of the one enthroned within, he could somehow sense that Jun Wu was sneering at them.

The fiery demonic giant was gradually dragged to the abyssal depths, but the flames on its body still burned; they were not extinguished even after it entered the water. The red light continued to glow from the blackness of the deep sea, only fading as the bone dragons dragged it deeper and deeper.

The heavenly officials sighed in relief, but Xie Lian didn’t dare relax completely.

For a while, silence fell. Abruptly, Xie Lian remembered that Pei Ming hadn’t answered his call, nor had he heard the voices of Banyue or the others. They had probably been dragged into the sea with the giant. Xie Lian feared the worst for them.

Suddenly, the surface of the sea below began to roil and bubble. As it spread outward, waves surged, and white smoke began to rise. The seawater was boiling!

Oh crap, Xie Lian thought. Just as he was about to fly upward, a hand broke through the waters and grabbed the giant divine statue’s ankle, yanking it down.

Xie Lian felt the violent jolt and looked down to see that the fiery demonic giant had dragged itself from the depths once more!

Its chest had already emerged, dripping with water. Most of the flames on its body had been extinguished but were now blazing back to life. Although its body was still tangled in the Bone Dragon Whip, the linked dragons could clearly no longer subdue it.

Jun Wu’s laughter echoed throughout the endless sea. It wasn’t wild, crowing cackling, nor was it mocking…but it was all the more chilling for its indescribability.

Half of the giant divine statue’s body had been dragged into the boiling water, and the heavenly officials hanging on near the bottom had to quickly climb higher. Even at the very top of the giant divine statue, Xie Lian could feel the suffocating steam and heat; it was so hot that sweat rolled from his forehead and down his back. If they were fully pulled into the sea, they would be cooked from toe to head!

This wouldn’t do—he needed a sword! No other weapon could release his full potential.

Suddenly, he heard the state preceptor’s voice. “Um… Fluffy child, what are you doing? Don’t just toss a corpse at me! Wait! Where are you going?!”

Xie Lian was alarmed to hear that. Still maintaining the hand seal, he shouted downward, “Qi Ying?”

There was no response, yet he saw a figure dash along the giant divine statue’s leg, then down the fiery demonic giant’s arm and straight for its head.

“Qi Ying, come back!” Xie Lian shouted.

However, voices could no longer reach Quan Yizhen. He was discovered the moment he dashed onto the giant's arm, and its other hand descended like it was slapping at a mosquito on its limb. It was incredibly fast and accurate and hit its target head-on with a resounding noise. *Smack!*

Many of the heavenly officials screamed in alarm, but when they looked again, Quan Yizhen was still running. The slap had been accurate indeed, but he had dodged into a crevice between the giant's fingers and escaped the tragic fate of becoming a bloody smear of flesh. Quan Yizhen leapt over the fingers and continued to run, and the giant continued to slap—he only barely dodged the first and second slap and it was clear that he might not be so lucky when the third came. He could end up crushed into a bloody pulp!

However, Quan Yizhen had already reached his destination before the third slap hit. He jumped inside the skull of one of the bone dragons that was tangling the fiery demonic giant. The ghost fire lanterns inside the bone dragon's eye sockets flashed with an explosion of light the moment he leapt in; its whole body radiated a white glow. It raised its head and gave a long howl as its body wrapped even tighter around the fiery giant. Xie Lian could hear the heavy sound of boulders grinding together. As it was crushed tighter and tighter, the fiery demonic giant loosened its grip and finally released the divine statue's ankle. Once free, Xie Lian instantly flew higher and reached out a hand.

"Qi Ying, come up here quickly! Don't keep tangling with it!"

Not only did Quan Yizhen not let go, he roared and used all of his strength to yank the linked Bone Dragon Whip even tighter as he rode it. Countless bits of rubble and debris fell into the sea, and the fiery demonic giant lost its patience. It hauled itself out of the water completely, and the flames of war roared anew from within the Palace of Divine Might to spread and burn across its body.

The bone dragon firmly wrapped around its body was submerged in the sea of fire, along with Quan Yizhen!

"Qi Ying!" Xie Lian cried. He leaned forward to charge the fiery giant and punch the linked Bone Dragon Whip apart!

Blanched, burning bone joints tumbled into the sea. Just as Xie Lian was about to catch the bone dragon skull with Quan Yizhen inside, the fiery giant slapped the skull and sent it flying kilometers away. The giant divine statue didn't manage to seize it in time before it was sent soaring off into the distance—and Quan Yizhen would probably have already fallen into the sea with the linked Bone Dragon Whip no matter how quickly they rushed over. And right now, the sea was literally boiling—the water where everything cooks!

At the last very second, a giant white bonefish leapt out of the water and caught the bone dragon's head; then, like a fish that had escaped the net, it whipped its tail and swam far, far away.

Although this had given Xie Lian a fright, there was no actual danger, and he sighed in relief as he rushed over to see.

The flames in the bone dragon's eye sockets had gone out after breaking away from the giant, but the teeth inside its skull were still chattering, and its mouth opened and closed like it was panting harshly. Quan Yizhen was sprawled inside its jaw, roasted and charred completely black. Perhaps it was because of the fire, but his hair seemed even curlier than usual. Thankfully, the bone dragon skull had acted as a protective shield—he wasn't burnt too badly and, given time and quiet care, he would heal from this. After all, Quan Yizhen was resilient.

The four bone dragons' condition was worse—scorched and battered, their bodies were scattered all over the surface of the sea, some pieces still burning even now. Xie Lian glanced at them and couldn't help but feel another wave of embarrassment.

"Um… We destroyed the guards of Black Water's abode. Is this really okay…?"

Hua Cheng smiled. "Don't worry. It's fine."

"Just how much money does he owe you…?" Xie Lian wondered.

Gawking at Quan Yizhen's tragic state, the heavenly officials murmured amongst themselves. "I…I can't believe His Highness Qi Ying. So very brave to stand tall in the face of danger and save everyone…"

Xie Lian recalled all the scorn and rejection Quan Yizhen had suffered in the Upper Court and shook his head, thinking, *He didn't go out there to save everyone.*

Far in the distance behind them, they heard a familiar crackling sound.

When they looked back, the giant's body was completely enveloped in raging fire. It didn't charge at them to attack—instead, it flew up into the sky and through the clouds. Then it vanished, just like that.

Despite their bewilderment, the heavenly officials rejoiced that they'd survived this calamity. "Has he given up on attacking us?!"

But Xie Lian had a bad feeling about this. "San Lang, how did he just vanish like that?"

“He activated the Teleportation Array,” Hua Cheng answered.

“Where did he go?”

Hua Cheng’s gaze was solemn. “The royal capital.”

Which was where Shi Qingxuan was guarding the human array!

Chapter 123:

With Burning Flames of Hell, Ghosts and Gods Descend Upon the Royal Capital

THEY HAD TO HURRY to the Royal Capital!

“You don’t have to worry about cleaning up out here. They’ll take care of themselves,” Hua Cheng said.

The state preceptor placed Yin Yu’s body on the back of one of the bonefish, and the bonefish carried the bone dragon skull, along with Quan Yizhen and Yin Yu, into the distance. Meanwhile, the other bonefish started to collect the pieces of the bone dragon that had fallen apart and began to puzzle the skeletons back together. It did indeed seem that they would take care of themselves.

There wasn’t a moment to lose, and without another word, Xie Lian directed the giant divine statue to fly into the sky. Shocked, the heavenly officials all called out to him.

“Your Highness, where are you going?”

“You can’t be thinking of chasing after him?! We finally escaped…”

“We have to pursue him!” Xie Lian said. “He went somewhere heavily populated! There’s no time to waste—everyone please hang on tight!”

A die flipped out from between Hua Cheng’s fingers. “Gege, are you ready?” he asked, voice low.

Xie Lian nodded. Hua Cheng tossed the die and said, “Teleportation Array, activate!”

The giant divine statue was filled anew with spiritual power and charged upward with all its might!

As expected, once they made it through the clouds, they could see the vibrant crimson of the fiery demonic giant glowering brightly against the black expanse of the horizon. They had also been transported to the skies above the royal capital!

When the people in the human array on the ground saw a flaming monster suddenly appear in the sky, looming overhead and descending toward them, some were stunned, some started screaming, and some were so terrified they almost fled.

Shi Qingxuan, too, sucked in a few sharp breaths, but he quickly snapped out of it and yelled to the crowd with all he had. “It’s all right! Nobody panic! It won’t reach us down here—someone will stop it before it does! It’s just the gods fighting, that’s all! Ha ha ha ha!”

“Is that really true, Ol’ Feng? It won’t be funny if a huge monster like that thwaps us down!”

Shi Qingxuan laughed wildly. “It’s true! Don’t you see that I’m here too? If anyone is gonna die, I’ll be first! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha…”

He was panicking so hard he’d lost his mind again.

Xie Lian directed the divine statue to fly over, dodging the walls of fire the giant was spouting until he could grab onto it in a desperate attempt to drag it back up and away from the ground.

All the while he was shouting, “Everyone, get down there, quickly!”

The heavenly officials were already terrified by the way Xie Lian was piloting the divine statue—they couldn’t wait to get off. They all hastily jumped off like dumplings being dropped into the pot.

The moment they landed, everyone got another shock when they saw Shi Qingxuan.

“Lord Wind Master? Why…why are you here?”

“Why do you look like that…?”

Shi Qingxuan was overjoyed. “Don’t ask so many questions! Come, come, come, join us quickly—join the human array and help support it! We can’t let the vengeful spirits break out!”

Most of the heavenly officials hesitated. It was Lang Qianqiu who rushed over first.

“I’ll give you a hand!”

Now that someone had taken the lead, the other heavenly officials joined in one after another. The human array was expanded and strengthened once again, growing even more secure. Xie Lian sighed in relief and continued to pull the fiery demonic giant upward, but suddenly, he heard a loud cracking noise. The fiery demonic giant had separated into parts once more!

One of its legs broke away from the main body and plummeted downward. Even just a leg could kill a huge number of people if it was allowed to continue on its deadly course and crash—not only would the human array be destroyed, but perhaps the entire street too!

Yet unexpectedly, the leg was only halfway down when it shattered to pieces and exploded in midair. Millions of tiny, glittering sparks harmlessly melted into the darkness of the night and spread across the sky, like smoky dust raining down after a magnificent fireworks show.

“Why would it explode on its own?” Xie Lian wondered in surprise.

Just then, a figure appeared in the midst of those fireworks and started flying upward against the air current. With a few more hops, it landed on the fiery demonic giant's body.

Once he got a good look at the figure, Xie Lian exclaimed in delight, "General Pei! You're all right—thank goodness!"

He'd been fully prepared to perform a funeral service for Pei Ming—completely free of charge!

Wielding a sword in one hand while the other smoothed back his locks, Pei Ming's hair remained perfect and his charm unruffled. "Not quite all right, but mostly all right," he said with dignified grace.

Still not cooked, even after being roasted and boiled—martial gods were certainly very resilient.

"Where are Banyue and Pei Xiu?" Xie Lian asked.

"They're fine," Hua Cheng said. "Gege, look over there."

Xie Lian turned his head to do so. Sure enough, Banyue was leading Pei Xiu to land on the roof of a house in the distance. It seemed that the Palace of Ming Guang had been sealed tightly enough that the boiling black seawater didn't completely flood the place, so everyone was mostly fine.

"Where are Xuan Ji and the others?" Xie Lian asked.

"I defeated them, of course!" a voice declared proudly.

That voice had come from Pei Ming's hand. It was only then that Xie Lian noticed Pei Ming was wielding the sword Mingguang!

"General Pei, you actually dare wield that sword?" he asked.

"It's a bit complicated to explain," Pei Ming replied with a chuckle.

Rong Guang chuckled as well. “How is it complicated? Didn’t you kneel before me to apologize, say you were wrong, and beg me for forgiveness?! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Feels great, feels *amazing*!”

“…”

“…”

With that, Xie Lian could guess how it’d probably gone. The three ghosts had likely delayed killing anyone in favor of fighting amongst themselves about which of them was getting a raw deal. Rong Guang had emerged the overwhelming victor and kicked Xuan Ji and Kemo aside—but by then, everything outside was rumbling, the ground was moving, and everyone was sent flying all over the palace. The situation was dire, but they couldn’t break out as they were—their only chance was to join forces. Rong Guang forced Pei Ming to admit his wrongs, and he was elated when Pei Ming did as he wished and apologized.

Even after losing a leg, the fiery demonic giant wasn’t angry. It began to leisurely repair itself—other boulders and golden palaces shifted toward the missing limb, and it wasn’t long before it was fully rebuilt. Although slightly smaller in size, it was still enormous.

Wielding the sword Mingguang, Pei Ming charged toward the Palace of Divine Might.

“General Pei, be careful!” Xie Lian exclaimed.

But Pei Ming’s attack power had exploded with Mingguang in hand. Although Rong Guang had an evil personality, the pair still knew how to work together best—as expected of Pei Ming’s longtime subordinate. Quan Yizhen hadn’t gotten anywhere close to the Palace of Divine Might before he was smacked away, but Pei Ming got much farther—he stormed straight inside!

While they fought, Rong Guang scolded Pei Ming from within the sword Mingguang. “Do you see?! I told you—if the two of us stood together, we’d be invincible! Nothing can stand in our way! If you had listened to me, would you still be a mere General Ming Guang after so many centuries?”

Veins popped on Pei Ming’s forehead. “Can you stop talking?!”

Qi Rong was hiding near the Palace of Divine Might, and he shouted arrogantly, “Friggin’ manwhore! I suggest you don’t seek your death by coming up here! Get the hell out!”

Mingguang slapped him so hard that the smack echoed in the air—*thwack!* “What the hell is this green thing?! Don’t block the way!”

Qi Rong almost spun a few times from the strike, but Guzi hugged his leg and struggled to steady him.

“Dad…are you all right?” he asked worriedly.

Although Qi Rong was outraged to lose face in front of Guzi, he knew he wasn’t tough enough to face Pei Ming head-on when the man and his sword were both bursting with killing intent. But his mouth was still as tough as ever, and he hollered, “USING DESPICABLE MOVES AGAIN!”

Unexpectedly, Guzi didn’t respond—instead, he slumped to the ground in a heap. When Qi Rong looked down, he saw that Guzi wasn’t moving. Glaring at him, he picked the boy up by the collar to wildly shake him back and forth.

“Foolish son, what are you playing at?”

Guzi was unconscious—his eyes were shut, and his forehead was burning.

Even though Xie Lian was still straining to pull the fiery demonic giant up, he took notice of the situation below.

“Qi Rong! Why haven’t you left?!” Xie Lian shouted. “It’s still burning down there, and we’ve been flying high in the air and deep underwater! That child is too young to endure the strain! He’ll die!”

Qi Rong looked up to cuss at him. “DON’T YOU DARE LECTURE ME! I know when you’re bluffing! This brat is cheaply raised; how could he die so easily?[6] Think I can’t tell that you just want to trick me into leaving? You’ll kill me the moment I do!”

Even if Xie Lian didn’t make a move against him, Lang Qianqiu was still waiting down below!

Inside the Palace of Divine Might, Pei Ming and Jun Wu had started fighting one-on-one. The flames of war singed Qi Rong again and again, and he screamed as he jumped in all directions to evade them.

“You’re a ghost, and even you can’t take this fire! You really expect a child to handle it?!” Xie Lian exclaimed angrily.

Tucked under Qi Rong’s arm, Guzi’s face was burning bright red, but Qi Rong’s mouth was as tough as ever. “Heh. Too bad, I won’t go! I won’t go! *WAH! WHAT THE FUCK!*”

A thrown flame exploded out of the palace and hit Qi Rong square in the face. He fled, crawling and stumbling in a circle, his backside nearly scorched. Finally, he bounced up, unable to hold back his complaints.

"Um, Jun Wu, you th… Boss man! Can you turn down that vicious heat a little?! You've burnt this…me!"

Xie Lian could tell he had wanted to say *"Jun Wu, you old thug, you've burnt this ancestor!"* but he valued his life enough not to give voice to such a statement. The way things were now, though, Jun Wu would hardly care—he was currently fighting Pei Ming with a disturbing smile on his face. The fires around Qi Rong were growing bigger and bigger, and there was practically no place left to stand. Although he was a ghost and couldn't die from burning, it was still torture.

Soon after, Guzi let out a devastating shriek from where he was tucked under Qi Rong's arm, like the fire had singed him. Qi Rong lifted him up to check, and sure enough, Guzi's forehead was bloody, and a small, burnt shoulder was visible through a large scorched hole in his robes.

The injuries had roused Guzi from unconsciousness by force, and he started hugging Qi Rong and bawling. "Dad, it hurts! I'm scared!"

Qi Rong had probably never encountered a situation like this before. Cold sweat rolled nonstop down his forehead, and for once his lips were frozen, at a loss for what to say.

Guzi covered his wound with his hand. "Dad, are we going to burn to death?" he asked through his tears and snot.

"Um… Um, well…" Qi Rong stuttered.

Guzi sniffled. "Even though your domain is very pretty, it doesn't seem like such a great place… The people here don't like us either. Why don't we find a different place to live—?"

Qi Rong couldn't take it anymore. He charged into the palace hall, wanting to grab Jun Wu but not daring to get close. He could only yell from afar, “Hey, can we talk, Jun…boss man? It’s fine if you wanna keep setting fires! This is your territory, so burn whatever you want! But… Hee hee hee… Can you, um…”

Xie Lian was going to fall off the jade crown platform out of sheer anger at Qi Rong’s foolish antics. “Stop trying to get yourself killed—just get out of there! I promise not to touch you!”

But Qi Rong still wouldn’t listen to him. Guzi was crying so loudly, and Jun Wu was ignoring him—he clearly didn’t care about Qi Rong’s existence in the slightest. Probably upset that he was losing face in front of his cheap son again, he rushed over.

“What’s up with your temper?!” he yelled at Jun Wu. “I told you to stop with the burning, didn’t you hear me?!”

“Qi Rong!” Xie Lian shouted.

Before Qi Rong even got close, Jun Wu raised his hand. A ball of fire shot forth to consume him whole!

Qi Rong let out a shrieking cry.

“Guzi!” Xie Lian shouted.

Even if Qi Rong wasn’t reduced to cinders by such a huge fire, he’d be injured severely—and Guzi would be burnt to ashes outright!

Pei Ming saw that Qi Rong had a small child under his arm and wanted to mount a rescue, but Jun Wu was gaining the upper hand and he couldn’t get away. He calculated the time in his head and knew they were probably beyond saving.

“My Lord, there was a child with him! There was no need to be so cruel!”

But both Xie Lian and Pei Ming could see that Jun Wu's eyes no longer saw anything as exempt from his brutality, child or not—all he could see were enemies and obstacles. With a swing of his arm, he sent another raging ball of fire flying from his palm, taking Pei Ming along with it.

"General Pei is on fire!" the officials below cried in alarm.

Suddenly, torrential rain poured from the skies. While it didn't put out the flames of war on the giant's body, it did extinguish the fire on Pei Ming. A black shadow leapt from the crowd into the sky and caught the general as he fell.

"Lord Rain Master!" Xie Lian called out.

Riding the black ox with her chin held high, the Rain Master inclined her head in greeting. Pei Ming, who was draped behind her across the ox, had suffered an accumulation of miseries—burnt to a crisp by raging fires, drenched like a drowned rat by pouring rain, hair a total mess. When he blearily blinked his eyes open, he realized it was the Rain Master who had caught him. Although she was wholly focused on guiding the ox and wasn't looking at him at all, he knew his current unhandsome state was visible to everyone else. Rather embarrassed, he quickly sat upright.

"Lor—"

A ring of black smoke puffed out the moment he opened his mouth.

Rong Guang was mad with rage. "I can't believe you needed a woman to save you—and what's more, it was Yushi Huang! Pei Ming, you're such an embarrassment!"

Pei Ming was vexed, and another series of black smoke rings puffed out as he retorted, "Can you shut up?!"

The Rain Master landed smoothly while pulling Pei Ming upright, and she was welcomed by Pei Xiu and Banyue.

Millions of chunks of rubble were still rolling from the body of the fiery demonic giant. The falling rocks blazed with fire and hurtled toward the ground like a meteor shower.

The rain poured harder, but the fires refused to be extinguished—it seemed Jun Wu had infused it with more spiritual power to fuel the flames. And even if raindrops could put out the fires, that would hardly solve their problems, as the hail of giant boulders would still riddle the royal capital with thousands of giant craters and injure or kill countless civilians. The huge divine statue was straining to pull the giant back, so Xie Lian couldn't break away to assist. He didn't know how many martial gods were present, nor whether they could catch every single falling rock without missing.

Terribly anxious, Xie Lian turned to Hua Cheng. "San Lang, what should we—"

Hua Cheng was standing right behind him, and he placed his hand over Xie Lian's. "There's no need for gege to worry. Just focus on what's in front of us, and don't mind what goes on below."

His voice was right next to Xie Lian's ear, his breath warm and gentle, and he gestured for Xie Lian to look with a slight motion of his chin. Xie Lian gazed at the direction Hua Cheng had indicated and saw that a figure clad in red was slowly approaching the human array with his hands clasped behind his back. Xie Lian squinted and felt himself being overtaken by shock and confusion.

That was…Hua Cheng? Another Hua Cheng?

What was going on? Xie Lian whirled around to confirm. Wasn't Hua Cheng standing right behind him?

Hua Cheng chuckled lightly. "Don't be so alarmed, gege. Your real San Lang is the one right here. No lie, exchange if fake."

Then was the one down there a clone Hua Cheng had left behind when he snuck into the Heavenly Capital? No wonder Jun Wu hadn't suspected anything; and here Xie Lian had been wondering whether he had eyes monitoring the area. Perhaps he *was* monitoring, but he simply saw that "Hua Cheng" was still guarding the royal capital and hadn't suspected a thing.

Shi Qingxuan didn't have the time to look at the sky, so he didn't see Xie Lian and Hua Cheng up there. When he saw "Hua Cheng" approaching, he quickly called out.

"Crimson Rain Sought Flower! You've finally come back! What the heck were you doing, being gone for so long—have you thought of a way to connect with His Highness? No, no, no, you'd better think of a way to help me deal with the situation here first! Do you see all those fiery rocks raining from the sky? Think fast! Blow a breath or make those countless little butterflies of yours fly up and chase them away or something, otherwise we'll die—"

"Hua Cheng" didn't say a word; he simply stared coldly and allowed Shi Qingxuan to spout his giant pile of words in one breath. Finally, as if he was growing impatient listening, he cut him off.

"Deal with it yourself."

"Deal with it myself?!" Shi Qingxuan exclaimed. "Don't joke at a time like this! I'm not His Highness, your humor makes no sense to me.

How can I deal with those rocks on my own—”

Before he finished his sentence, “Hua Cheng” seized the back of his collar and yanked him out of the human array. Shi Qingxuan reacted amazingly fast; he hauled the people on his left and right together the moment he left the array so the human chain wasn’t broken. Yet unexpectedly, “Hua Cheng” wasn’t done after he pulled him out—he turned his hand and smacked Shi Qingxuan, sending him flying.

All of the beggars were shocked. “Ol’ Feng?!”

“Why’d you hit him?!” some of them complained loudly at “Hua Cheng.”

Although Shi Qingxuan was sent flying, he only tumbled and rolled a few times. He immediately crawled out of his sprawl on the ground and found his footing again. “It’s fine, it’s fine, I didn’t die! He didn’t really hit me—he was just lending me spiritual power!”

“Really…?”

Shi Qingxuan examined his hands, then looked at his body, which was emitting spiritual light from head to toe. “Hua-chengzhu, there’s no need to act like this just because you can’t see His Highness, you know? If you want to lend me spiritual power, do it nicely! I don’t mind eating a few more of those weird-tasting candies, so there’s no need to hit people, all right? Why don’t you focus a little more on the sky instead! There are still so many rocks up there—”

Just then, “Hua Cheng” flung something at him. Without thinking, Shi Qingxuan reached up and caught it, but his entire face blanched when he saw what he had caught.

It was the Wind Master Fan.

Seeing this from atop the giant divine statue, Xie Lian couldn’t hold back his questions. “San Lang, wasn’t the Wind Master Fan with… The one down there is…?!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Hua Cheng said. “I called him over at the last minute to lend a hand.”

Shi Qingxuan clutched that familiar, beloved fan, his neck stiff, and slowly turned to “Hua Cheng.”

“Deal with it yourself,” “Hua Cheng” repeated coldly.

The flaming meteors were about to crash into the ground, and the people within the human array could practically feel the waves of heat assaulting their faces. They were awash in sweat both hot and cold.

“Ol’ Feng, what you said is true, right? Will everything really be okay?”

“Your Highness, please think of a plan quickly!” the heavenly officials cried out.

Shi Qingxuan gripped the fan, veins bulging on the back of his hand. Red flooded his eyes bit by bit.

A moment later, he whirled around and swung his arm, and a whirlwind blew up from the flat ground and into the sky. The flaming meteor shower was blown away in an instant, sent back from whence it came!

At first, the beggars had been scared half to death and seemed ready to flee at a moment’s notice. But that wild wind had utterly blown their minds. Their eyes bulged, their mouths went slack—they were the very picture of shock.

It was a long moment before one said, “A…a god?”

“Whoa! Ol’ Feng, could you actually be a real god?!” someone called out.

Shi Qingxuan’s hand was still shaking from swinging the fan, and he was panting heavily. It was a while before he gathered himself. “D-duh…!” he replied arduously. “Didn’t I tell you all a long time ago? How ’bout that?! I told you all it wasn’t bullshit!”

“No, no, no bull! I believe you now! Wow, Ol’ Feng is a god! Let’s tell everyone that we know a god! Now we’ve struck it rich, ha ha ha ha…”

“Ol’ Feng, let’s talk! Take us flying when you’ve got the time, ’kay?!”

Seeing all this, “Hua Cheng” snorted softly and turned around to leave. Shi Qingxuan was still gripping the Wind Master Fan, absentmindedly answering the others’ jokes even as his complexion alternated between red and white and cold sweat dripped from his forehead. He looked up like he wanted to ask a question, but the person who could answer him was already gone.

A distance away from the human array, new, strange noises could suddenly be heard from within the darkness.

Squeak, squeak, squeak. Squeak, squeak, squeak.

Those with sharp eyes cried out when they saw the source. “What are those things?! An army of…rats?”

“And what’s that behind them? People? Why are they pale as ash…?”

“They don’t look alive…”

“What?” Xie Lian gasped.

It was an army of corpse-eating rats and empty-shelled people—those monsters from Mount Tonglu had been transported here! The empty-shelled people wobbled over with stiffened limbs, and the corpse-eating rats that had survived on human flesh swarmed like a black tide. It appeared that Jun Wu would stop at nothing to destroy the human array—he no longer cared about anything else and was willing to throw the Mortal Realm into absolute chaos!

“Watch over General Pei. I will protect the array,” the Rain Master instructed Banyue and the others.

Pei Ming had been lying there puffing black smoke for a while, but when he heard that, he started to push himself up. “I’m fine, I can go protect the array.”

He tried to struggle upright, but he just fell down again. Even Pei Xiu couldn’t watch anymore.

“Forget it, general. Just…mind your wounds and let Lord Rain Master take care of it.”

This was probably the first time Pei Ming had been so thoroughly humiliated in front of a woman, and it was also the first time a woman had saved him. He couldn’t tell if he was angry or if it was simply his pride throwing a fit, but his face went dark red for some reason or other. The Rain Master ignored his attitude and smiled.

“There’s no need for the general to push himself.”

Then she left, riding the black ox.

“Lord Rain Master!” Pei Ming called.

Just then, another hand came crawling up to catch him by the neck.

“Pei darling…” a haunting voice cooed.

Pei Ming was still struggling to come to terms with what had just happened, but the moment he heard that voice, he felt nothing but exasperation. “Why are you still here?”

Xuan Ji had actually been around the entire time, as Banyue had captured both her and Kemo after Rong Guang injured them. Banyue brought them along when she escaped.

Hearing Pei Ming’s unkind tone, she instantly turned malicious.

“Why am I still here? *I’ve always been here!* What are you doing, staring at Rain Master? Have you fallen in love with someone else again? You want to go chase after her now, huh? What’s so good about her?! I won’t allow it!”

Finally at the end of his patience, Pei Ming shoved her away as he exclaimed angrily, “Xuan Ji, why is that the only thing in your brain, even now? It has nothing to do with falling in love; I’ve barely exchanged two words with the Rain Master!”

This was the first time he’d ever raised a hand against Xuan Ji. She fell to the ground from the sudden shove, completely stunned.

It was a good while before she said incredulously, “Pei darling, I think of you because I love you. Is that so wrong? You’ve never been so mean to me before. Do you really hate me so much?”

Pei Ming used his sword to help himself stand. “I can’t get through to you.”

But Xuan Ji still wouldn’t give up. “*Tell me!* Are you really going to leave me? I’ve done so much for you! Aren’t you touched at all, now that you’ve seen what I’ve become? Don’t you feel any guilt?”

“Didn’t I already answer that centuries ago?!” Pei Ming shouted.

Xuan Ji was dumbfounded, completely at a loss on what to do. She clutched the hem of his robes in a death grip, but she could only stagger and hop after him on her broken legs. “Pei darling… Pei darling… Wait, why don’t we talk a bit more…?”

Banyue watched. While she knew Pei Ming had abandoned Xuan Ji first, Xuan Ji had killed countless people afterward and tried to kill them time and time again. But right now, she was a little pitiful.

Pei Ming looked back at her. In the end, he only said, “Xuan Ji, it’s time to wake up.”

“Wake up what?” Xuan Ji was confused.

“I’m part of the reason you became like this, but the rest was all your own decisions. You’re the only one who could be moved by all the things you’ve done. I’m a steel-hearted man. Don’t love me—love yourself.”

He yanked his robes from Xuan Ji’s hold and left without looking back.

Shi Qingxuan didn’t have much spiritual power remaining after swinging the fan, so after a brief bout of a panic, the only option was to have the Rain Master and several martial gods take over as the first line of defense for the human array. Yet unexpectedly, a rowdy commotion erupted from all around.

“Quack, quack, is this the royal capital, quack? Such big houses, quack!”

“Why are you making a fuss? Chengzhu’s houses are bigger!”

“Yeah, and they’re not as pretty as Chengzhu’s houses either!”

All sorts of oddly shaped heads appeared from the alleyways, at the ends of the streets, over the eaves of houses; it was extremely lively. The monster and ghost citizens of Ghost City had joined the fray!

When Heaven's Eye and company saw them from within the array, they shouted impatiently, "What's with those ghosts?! Go away! Go back! This is the emperor's domain—how dare you come to mess around in the royal capital?!"

"You, pig spirit! You dare show your face in front of me?!"

"I'm not hallucinating, am I…? That's a duck…a duck beating a rat?"

A volley of graveside fruit offerings was flung at them in response.

"Shut up, you nasty cultivators! We're giving you some face here! So shameless!"

"Who'd wanna come to this dump? We're only here on Chengzhu's orders!"

"Kneel and thank us!"

The black, swarming tide of corpse-eating rats still had eyes blazing red with greed, yet the situation was playing out much differently than they had expected. They charged forth with murderous intent, but they were greeted by a band of nefarious creatures many times their size—a band that smashed and stabbed wildly at them with pitchforks and rakes. These creatures had their own hungry, red glint in their eyes, more vicious by far.

"So many rats!"

"Come, come, come, hee hee hee! I've been waiting a long time for you! I've never had aperitifs that have been aged two thousand years—the nutritional value must be superb!"

"Can we manage to eat all of these things?"

"Chengzhu said if we can't eat 'em all, we can sell 'em!"

The corpse-eating rats saw the situation going downhill and lost their nerve, retreating in terror and tripping the empty-shelled people in the process. The dire situation was instantly defused, and Xie Lian sighed again in relief as he turned back to say, "Thank goodness for San Lang."

Hua Cheng smiled. "They wanted to come on their own—it had nothing to do with me. Rather than thanking me, gege, be careful."

His tone turned serious at the last two words. Xie Lian looked back and saw that the fiery demonic giant was making another move—it had placed its hand by its waist as if it was about to pull something out.

Xie Lian's heart lurched.

It was a sword.

The giant was already a handful as it was, but adding a sword to the mix? Was that any different from giving wings to a tiger?

Xie Lian felt a sense of foreboding, and he yelled to the people below, "Everyone, be careful!"

Though the ghosts were caught up in the heat of the rat beatdown, when they heard Xie Lian, they looked up and cried out in awe.

"What a giant grand-uncle… Ah, no, Xie-daozhang!"

"Chengzhu looks like he's having a good time up there, quack!"

"No, we're not playing around—" Xie Lian began.

But before he finished his sentence, a sharp sword that blazed with fire and burst with murderous aura came slashing down. Xie Lian released his grip on the giant and barely dodged the attack. The sword's aura and the heat of its strike thoroughly alarmed him.

The divine statue had already barely been fending off the other giant—but now it couldn't return a single blow!

Under such dire circumstances, he wished he could summon a few martial gods to transform into a sword to help. But Quan Yizhen was currently lying in the broken pieces of a bone dragon, cruising around on the back of a bonefish in Black Water's lair as he slowly recovered. Lang Qianqiu was being used like he was a hundred men, supporting the human array against the vengeful spirits rampaging harder and harder. Feng Xin and Mu Qing had for some reason been missing since they left the Heavenly Capital. Only Pei Ming was available, but he was probably useless for the cause—thanks in no small part to his resolute refusal to be shown up by the Rain Master, he was preoccupied helping cut down the rats even though he was charred completely black and still spouting smoke rings. There was no one Xie Lian could actually use!

A voice came from below. "Just wait, Your Highness! Your sword will be here momentarily!"

That was the state preceptor. Xie Lian rushed to the edge of the jade crown platform.

"What? Where's my sword?"

The state preceptor cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled up at them. "Crimson Rain Sought Flower, activate the Teleportation Array! Connect it to Mount Tonglu! The sword is coming!"

Hua Cheng resolutely tossed out a die. "Activate!"

Something rumbled above them within the pitch-black layers of clouds. Xie Lian squinted and looked up.

There really was a sword up there!

The divine statue leapt and reached for the longsword. Xie Lian formed a hand seal, before using both hands to grip it, and the giant divine statue gripped the hilt in the same way. And then it slashed toward the Heavenly Capital!

The giant raised its sword to parry the attack, yet when the two swords clashed, something happened that no one could have expected—the sword in Xie Lian's hand cut through the sword wielded by the fiery giant!

With the earth-shattering sound of tearing metal, the fiery demonic giant came to an abrupt stop. It then shattered into several pieces which tumbled to the earth below.

A one-hit knockout? Xie Lian never expected this sword to be so powerful. He stared at the blade in the hands of the giant divine statue, completely stunned.

Scintillating and fine and extremely sharp. What was this sword?

The state preceptor had told Hua Cheng to open a Teleportation Array to Mount Tonglu, and it suddenly dawned on him—this was probably a sword forged from the bodies of the three mountain spirits!

But he had no time to dwell on that, for it would be no laughing matter if that massive thing crashed to earth. Xie Lian hurriedly directed the giant divine statue to fly down and grab the enormous, crumbling boulder. Once he had a grip on it, he changed course, flying some distance away before carefully landing in a more remote location.

Only then did the giant divine statue sheathe the sword at its waist and stand in place. One hand came to rest upon the sword's hilt, while the other opened to reveal the two figures it was holding in its palm like it was cradling a pair of flowers. The gentle smile returned to its face as it resumed the posture of the Flower-Crowned Martial God and stopped moving.

Not a single rock had hit the ground. Everyone in the royal capital was completely unharmed!

After a long moment, all the people, gods, and ghosts looked at each other. "Is…is it over?"

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng hopped off the giant divine statue's palm and met up with everyone back at the capital. Shi Qingxuan's cold sweat had turned hot, and he tucked the Wind Master Fan into his waistband—broken once more after only one use. He hurried over to them, hobbling and wobbling, hopping and dragging his leg.

"Your Highness! Is it over? Is everything taken care of?"

A few other heavenly officials gathered around as well. "Where's the Emp…Jun Wu? Your Highness, have you defeated him? Is he dead?"

From the sidelines, the state preceptor said, "How could that be? His Highness…he wouldn't be defeated so easily."

Hua Cheng extended a hand to Xie Lian. "Gege, let's go and search."

Xie Lian nodded and gave him his hand. Hua Cheng gently pulled him to the top of the wreckage. The ghosts had already lost interest in the corpse-eating rats, since the rats had been beaten thoroughly and fled—so they all jumped up as well, excitedly chattering among themselves that they wanted to "clean out the heavenly capital."

“Stay back,” Hua Cheng directed them. “Anyone irrelevant to the search may not approach.”

It’d be certain death if they bumped into Jun Wu, after all. The ghosts jumped back down and continued to guard the base of the ruined giant.

However, there was no trace of Jun Wu within the pile of wreckage that was once the Heavenly Capital. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng looked everywhere, even raising the golden roof of the Palace of Divine Might, but they found no one.

Lang Qianqiu turned to Pei Ming. “General Pei! I’ve got something to do; please take over for me for a moment.”

Pei Ming was feeling petulant and depressed. He couldn’t measure up to the Rain Master’s total number of rats killed, and now he was being dragged over randomly to hold up the array. Still, he didn’t say much, just rubbed his nose.

Lang Qianqiu leapt onto the wreckage and rummaged around. Finally, after raising a caved-in roof, he exclaimed, “Found him!”

Xie Lian heard him and went over. “Qianqiu, careful!”

He thought Lang Qianqiu had found Jun Wu, but he had actually uncovered a charred black ball—like a shriveled worm in a giant shell. They could hear tiny coughs coming from it.

Feeling his heart tighten, Xie Lian hurried to help Lang Qianqiu peel away the charred shell. A small child rolled out, curled in on himself and hugging his head. His whole body was red, likely from burns—however, his life was not in danger, and he was still coughing.

After he rolled out, a ball of vivid green ghost fire crept out and floated around him.

Xie Lian looked at it. “This is…”

Lang Qianqiu seized the ball of ghost fire with one hand, his eyes sparking with fire. “The heavens have eyes! Qi Rong, you didn’t die completely, and you still ended up in my hands in the end!”

Qi Rong had really become the “Night-Touring Green Lantern.” When Jun Wu had shot out that blast of fire, Qi Rong must have protected Guzi—it was the only reason why the child hadn’t burned to death. Xie Lian was a little surprised in spite of himself. After all, it was more Qi Rong’s style to throw Guzi in front of him as a shield.

Hua Cheng could immediately tell what he was thinking. “Tossing the child out to block the fire wouldn’t accomplish much; he’d burn to ash in an instant. Shielding or protecting didn’t make that much difference to him.”

Even if it didn’t really make a difference, Qi Rong still chose to protect him.

Despite being reduced to nothing more than a ball of vivid green ghost fire, he still didn’t disperse. He started screaming in terror when Lang Qianqiu grabbed him.

The recently rescued Guzi was roused by the ruckus and hugged Lang Qianqiu’s leg. “Gege, don’t kill my dad!”

“Let go!” Lang Qianqiu exclaimed angrily. “I’ll tell you right now—it’s useless even if you beg! I won’t show you mercy!”

To demonstrate, he gripped Qi Rong harder. Qi Rong was his enemy, the one who annihilated his clan—Xie Lian couldn't interfere, but he was afraid that Lang Qianqiu would accidentally hurt Guzi in his fury. Xie Lian got ready to pull the boy back, but unexpectedly, Guzi tackled him and caught him in a hug.

"Scrap gege, save my dad!"

"Guzi… He really isn't your dad," Xie Lian said. "Can't you tell by the way he treats you?"

However, Guzi insisted, "He *is* my dad! My dad didn't use to be good to me, but then after he was really good to me. He gave me lots of meat to eat, and he even said he would take me to live in big, beautiful mansions… He's really good to me, scrap gege! Will you please save him?"

"Foolish son, don't beg him!" Qi Rong started scolding. "That blackhearted snow lotus won't save this ancestor! In fact, he can't wait for your old man to kick the bucket—he doesn't care one bit whether I live or die!"

Hua Cheng side-eyed him. "Are you worried that Lang Qianqiu won't be able to kill you, so you're making sure I'll finish the job?"

The moment he spoke, the ball of ghost fire shriveled a bit—Qi Rong was still quite afraid of him. But if he was going to die either way, he'd go all out.

"HUA CHENG, YOU FUCKER, I'M NOT AFRAID OF YOU! Xie Lian, don't think I don't know! I took you for a god in the heavens, but you—what did you take me for?! You never took me for anything! You scorned me, thought I was a fool, a madman, a mental case—you looked at me with nothing but contempt. You've always looked down on me! What right do you have to look down on me?! You couldn’t even destroy measly little Yong’an, you useless piece of trash!”

“You—” While Hua Cheng didn’t move, Xie Lian could sense something and quickly held him back after uttering that single word. “Never mind, drop it.”

Hua Cheng didn’t even bother with a fake smile. He scoffed. “So what if he looks down on you? Is there anything about you that’s worth high regard?”

Fuming and flustered, Qi Rong sputtered at him, “I SPIT AT YOU! I SPIT! So…so what if you all look down on me?! This ancestor…this ancestor…this ancestor has a son!”

“…”

“…”

Qi Rong started cackling maniacally. “Heh! Even though he was picked up for cheap, it’s still better than what you bloodline-ending impotent cowards can manage! Don’t even dream of having one, NOT EVEN IN EIGHT HUNDRED YEARS! HEE HEE, HA HA HA HA…”

Struck speechless, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng simply stared at him. Although Hua Cheng didn’t waste any further words on Qi Rong, he raised his brows at Xie Lian and mouthed the words, *“You never know.”*

Xie Lian knew he was only joking and gave a weak smile. As he laughed, Qi Rong’s mad voice grew smaller and smaller until finally, the jumping ball of vivid green ghost fire fizzled out.

Lang Qianqiu didn’t know whether Qi Rong’s ghost fire had gone out on its own or if he was the one who choked it out, and he stood there, dumbfounded. Guzi was just as shocked, and he hurried over to pull each of

Lang Qianqiu’s fingers open. When he saw nothing in his palm, he fell to his knees and started digging at the pile of charred residue on the ground, sifting and searching until his hands were covered in black soot. But there was still no green light, and all he could do was clutch onto Lang Qianqiu’s robe.

“Where’s my dad…?”

Lang Qianqiu didn’t know how to respond to his begging, so he looked at Xie Lian. Xie Lian didn’t know what to say either and simply sighed before turning to leave.

Behind him, he could still hear Guzi’s incessant pleas. “Gege, where’s my dad? He’s still around, right? He said he already cultivated to be the, um…the most powerful king of the three realms, so he can’t die. He’s still here somewhere, right?”

The constant irritation known as Qi Rong was finally gone. But not only did Xie Lian not know what to say, he couldn’t even understand what he was feeling. To be honest, Qi Rong’s words could not be rebuked—it was true that he’d never regarded his younger cousin very highly, ever since they were young. At first he had felt sympathy for Qi Rong; later, it was head-pounding exasperation, and he did his best to ignore him. Out of sight, out of mind. But if he was accused of always having regarded Qi Rong with contempt, then…that seemed fairly accurate as well.

It wasn’t just contempt—he had once hated Qi Rong so much he wanted to crush him to dust and scatter his ashes all over the world. But he’d lived for so long and experienced so much, and when he looked at Qi Rong now, there was nothing left but annoyance and fatigue. Perhaps a little contempt remained, but it hardly mattered at this point.

No joy, no grief.

They continued their search, but it was fruitless. When they came down from the wreckage, Shi Qingxuan had been waiting on the ground for a long time.

“Your Highness, how’d it go?”

Xie Lian shook his head. “We couldn’t find him.”

“How can that be?!”

The heavenly officials started discussing the matter among themselves.

“Could he really have died? Turned to ash or something?”

“It’d be much too scary if he’s still out there hiding!”

“Where could he hide, though? There are so many people watching!”

Shi Qingxuan looked around. “Your Highness, I have a question I’ve been wanting to ask for a while. Where are Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen?”

It was a valid thing to ask—no one had seen Feng Xin and Mu Qing for a long time. The heavenly officials started chattering again.

“Those two generals couldn’t have met with the same problem as General Pei, right? Were they trapped in their own palaces in the Heavenly Capital?”

“That’s impossible—I saw General Nan Yang come out! He said he was looking for someone…”

Chapter 124:
Exquisite Dice, Apprehension from Rolling a One (Part One)

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON with Mu Qing, but Feng Xin was looking for Jian Lan and the fetus spirit," Xie Lian whispered to Hua Cheng. "They couldn't have…"

Surely Feng Xin couldn't have stayed behind in the Heavenly Capital while the rest of them fled and been trapped in the alternating floods and infernos as they hurtled between Heaven and Earth?

Or worse, maybe both he and Mu Qing were in Jun Wu's clutches!

The state preceptor walked over. "Your Highness, there's no need to keep searching. He would have no reason to hide if he were in the area—there might be a lot of people around, but not many His Highness would care to pay attention to. Since he's not here, he could have only gone to one place, and it's somewhere he'd want you to follow him."

Xie Lian understood. "Mount Tonglu?"

The state preceptor nodded. "He probably activated the Teleportation Array. After the Heavenly Capital, that's the domain where he's most powerful."

"Huh? You're going to Mount Tonglu?" Shi Qingxuan exclaimed. "That horrifying place?!"

"We've already been there once," Xie Lian said. "It's all right; it's not that scary. Maybe Feng Xin and Mu Qing are there too."

However, the state preceptor warned him, "Don't lower your guard; you won't encounter the same things this time." After a pause, he said, "I think I'll accompany the two of you, and it'd be best if you could find a few dependable martial gods to help. No one who's injured—even if they offer their aid, they'll only drag you down."

That would be a real challenge. A "dependable martial god"? Perhaps there had once been some dependable martial gods around, but there weren't many left at this point. Some had fallen, some were burnt to a crisp, some were missing in action, some had a wailing child hugging their leg.

"There's no need to look for any helpers—they're all useless," Hua Cheng said. "Gege and I are enough."

"You definitely won't be enough," the state preceptor insisted.

"Crimson Rain Sought Flower, can you please not say 'They're all useless' in such a convincing tone?!" Pei Ming objected from afar.

Shi Qingxuan laughed heartily. "General Pei, what are you complaining about?! You're burnt to a crisp, and you didn't even cut down as many rats as Lord Rain Master!"

It had been a long time since he'd seen Pei Ming, but Shi Qingxuan still found pleasure in taunting him. Pei Ming had been stabbed where it hurt and couldn't do a thing about it, so he sank back into depression.

A voice suddenly rang out. "Wait, take me. I'll go."

The crowd parted to see who had spoken and were surprised to discover Mu Qing. It seemed he'd been standing at the very back of the massive group for a while.

Xie Lian took a breath of relief at the sight of him. "Mu Qing? When did you get here? Where were you earlier? I thought you'd gone missing too."

"I've been here the whole time," Mu Qing claimed.

Hua Cheng crossed his arms, giving him a side-eye. "Been here the whole time, but without saying a word or lending a hand, huh?"

"I told you—I've been here the whole time," Mu Qing replied tonelessly. "It's just that I didn't speak and none of you saw me. That's all."

However, there had been several occasions when they needed people and he couldn't be found; he never answered, even when called directly. Everyone had naturally assumed that General Xuan Zhen had gone missing.

Xie Lian hoped that Feng Xin might still be in the crowd as well, but a search turned up nothing—he really wasn't here.

And so, he could only say, "All right. You're coming along to help? That's great—finally someone useful."

Thus, Mu Qing walked over to join the group. When they saw that he was coming along, the state preceptor and Hua Cheng wore the same expressions for once. Both of them had disliked Mu Qing for ages—no need to reiterate Hua Cheng's reasons, but the state preceptor hadn't really wanted to take Mu Qing as a disciple from the start. Even in this dire situation, it was fairly clear that he'd rather not have any helpers at all than have one like Mu Qing.

Mu Qing couldn't be ignorant of their opinions, but when he approached, he still bowed to the state preceptor and quietly acknowledged him with, "Master."

The state preceptor simply nodded without a word. After all, it wasn't like Mu Qing had done anything heinous or criminal—and he had offered to help, so there was no reason to refuse his assistance.

Turning to Shi Qingxuan, the state preceptor said, “His Highness’s divine statue will guard this place. It’ll still be a few days before the vengeful spirits are completely purified. But you’ve got plenty of help here, so you’ll need to take care of it yourselves.”

Shi Qingxuan nodded. “Of course! But wait! Elder, I’ve asked you this so many times already—will you please answer me? Who are you?”

The state preceptor didn’t answer.

The expedition group followed Hua Cheng to the front of a nearby mansion. Tossing a die into the air with practiced ease, he reached out to open the door—but unexpectedly, his color changed slightly when he glanced down at the results.

Xie Lian was sharp and caught it. “What is it, San Lang? Is the Teleportation Array not activating?”

Hua Cheng snapped out of it and smiled. “No. It’s just… It’s rare that I roll like this.”

He opened his palm to show Xie Lian, who pressed close to look. He was also shocked at the sight.

A lonesome die sat upon his pale white palm, and it showed a lonesome dot.

There were always six bright red dots whenever Hua Cheng rolled—ones were truly very rare. Xie Lian's heart trembled.

"What does this mean…? Is it a mistake?"

"Based on past experiences, it probably means there's something extremely dangerous waiting for me ahead," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian's heart lurched a little bit, and he couldn't find the words to reply.

Behind them, the state preceptor sighed. "How many times have I told you young people that gambling is bad and that you should quit? Look at him, Your Highness. Look at the rotten habit he's picked up!"

It was a bad omen, but Hua Cheng still looked unperturbed; he tucked the dice away, smiling. "It doesn't actually matter what I roll—it's just for my own reference. I'm the only one who gets to decide whether it's dangerous or not." Then he opened the door. "Let's go, gege."

He turned and was just about to cross the threshold when Xie Lian reached out automatically and pulled him back, almost blurting, *"Don't go!"* But Xie Lian knew that was impossible to ask of him.

In the end, he only said softly, "Let's go. But don't leave my side. If anything happens, I will protect you."

Hua Cheng was stunned by this. It was a good moment before the corners of his lips curled, and he broke into a wide smile. "All right. Gege, remember to protect me."

"…"

Mu Qing watched from the side, his expression unreadable—it was one of either horror or disgust. However, the moment Hua Cheng opened the door, a wave of scorching heat lunged at him, extinguishing any further strange faces.

The volcano had erupted not long ago, and the flying debris and ash choking the skies hadn't yet dispersed. The forests that had once been here were now ablaze, and the fires devoured every living thing—Mount Tonglu's former appearance was replaced by this hellish inferno, painted entirely in red.

The moment Xie Lian and company emerged from a rocky cave on a hill, they were almost suffocated by the ash in the air.

"Is he really here?"

"Likely nearer to the Kiln," Mu Qing said.

"The volcano erupted; there's probably nowhere near the Kiln he could stay."

However, the state preceptor said, "I know where he is—if it hasn't been destroyed, that is. Just follow me and you'll see when we get there."

The group made their way down the tall hill, and Hua Cheng walked in front of Xie Lian the entire time. Where rubble and tall weeds made steps difficult, he'd go forward first to flatten the path before turning around to reach for Xie Lian and help him down. Otherwise, Xie Lian probably would've descended much faster—by slipping at the highest point of the hill and rolling all the way to the bottom.

While Xie Lian didn't slip, they were surprised when someone else did instead—Mu Qing was bringing up the rear and lost his footing, his balance swaying. Xie Lian was closest and caught him with a quick hand.

"Watch out!"

Mu Qing jolted slightly before seeming to return to his senses. “I know.”

Mu Qing was behaving quite oddly, but Xie Lian let go. Turning his head, he suddenly remembered something and quickly jogged to Hua Cheng’s side to whisper a question.

“By the way, San Lang—when Feng Xin and Mu Qing were fighting on the snowy mountain top, what did you hear them say? Why did you get so angry?”

Hua Cheng’s face turned slightly cold at the question, but he concealed his expression a moment later. “Oh, that. They were just talking without thinking and said some disrespectful things about gege. That’s all.”

“Huh?” Xie Lian asked. “Like what?”

“Gege doesn’t need to know,” Hua Cheng said. “It’ll dirty your ears. Come, we’re down.”

The four of them had descended the tall hill, and, after walking for a bit, their path forward was blocked by a river. But this river didn’t flow with clear water; it flowed with bubbling crimson-red sludge—molten lava!

At this burning temperature, a normal person wouldn’t even need to fall in; they’d die from proximity to the radiating heat. Fortunately, none of them were mortals, so they could endure this bone-melting land.

The state preceptor kept wiping at the sweat on his face. “It should be right across here. There used to be a moat, but we won’t be able to cross now that it’s like this.”

“We’ll probably need something to help us across the river,” Xie Lian said.

If the giant divine statue were here, they could've crossed swiftly in a few huge steps, but it had been left behind at the royal capital to stand guard and suppress the vicious spirits. And the three mountain spirits had already transformed into a sword, so it was best that they didn't come.

"San Lang, can the silver butterflies bring us across?" Xie Lian asked.

"They might melt halfway across, thanks to the steam," Hua Cheng replied.

It wouldn't be great to fall halfway through crossing and plunge headfirst into the heart of the lava stream.

"But there's a ready-made path," Hua Cheng added.

The group turned to see what he meant, and a moment later, Xie Lian exclaimed, "Why are there people in the lava?"

It was the absolute truth—Xie Lian wasn't hallucinating. In that instant, he saw a ghastly pale hand poke out of the lava and reach toward the sky.

"It's true!" Mu Qing cried, looking closer. "And there's not just one…?"

There were hundreds upon thousands of them. Bodies and heads floated on the surface of the river, some rolling and turning with the current of the lava stream, some pushing against it. All the bodies were peculiarly white, and their faces were indistinct. They were not living humans.

Xie Lian figured it out. "They're the empty-shelled people from the royal capital of Wuyong… They've been flushed out here by the lava."

Considering their martial skills, it wouldn’t be too difficult to leap across using the empty-shelled people as stepping stones. These deceased spirits were already struggling in torment in the burning stream, so it was rather tragic that they would be stepped on as well. But they didn’t have time to worry about that now.

Mu Qing went first. Choosing his path, he crossed the moat in a few quick bounds. He stood on the other shore, looking back their way.

Xie Lian turned to the state preceptor. “Let me take you across next.”

The state preceptor nodded and moved toward him—he wasn’t a martial god and didn’t practice martial arts, after all, so he needed someone to help him.

However, Hua Cheng spoke up. “Gege, let me.”

Xie Lian went along with his request. “All right.”

Thus, Hua Cheng stepped forward and took the state preceptor’s arm like he was assisting an elderly man. “Lord State Preceptor, sir, please watch your step.”

The state preceptor turned his head and knitted his brows when he saw that Xie Lian wasn’t the one taking him. “Huh? Why is it you?”

Xie Lian couldn’t help but puff a laugh, hiding it with a light cough. “San Lang very sincerely told me that he wanted to assist you, so I’ll let him do it on my behalf.”

“Why so attentive out of the blue?” the state preceptor demanded.

“Does it matter if it’s me or gege?” Hua Cheng said with a wide smile. “Besides, sir, I respect you very much, so of course I don’t mind helping. This is nothing.”

The state preceptor was speechless for a moment, then said, “If you really respect me, wipe that fake smile off your face. That fake attitude is too much.”

Hua Cheng immediately wiped said smile away. “Oh.”

Without another word, he lifted the state preceptor, and they were on the other shore in a flash. He was staggeringly fast, and before the state preceptor could react, he was already standing by Mu Qing’s side, completely stunned. As for the empty-shelled people Hua Cheng had stepped on, they hadn’t even noticed. They simply rubbed their heads, puzzled to see nothing when they looked up, and continued to swim in the lava stream.

Sense finally returned to the state preceptor, and he glanced at Hua Cheng to give his judgment. “Not bad, I suppose.”

That’s way too strict. How could skill like that only be “not bad”? Xie Lian thought, shaking his head.

“I’m coming over now too!” he called.

Hua Cheng turned around. “Gege, stay there! I’ll come get you!”

But Xie Lian had already acted before he heard Hua Cheng’s words. He leapt and landed on tiptoe upon the stomach of an empty-shelled person floating faceup. He felt the solid body beneath his feet dip, but he had already leapt again, landing on the head of another empty-shelled person further on.

In this manner, he used five or six of them to reach the center of the lava stream. Just as Xie Lian was about to make another leap, however, he sank down abruptly and almost lost his balance. After using his incomparably fast reflexes to steady himself, he looked down—only to see that the shell beneath his feet had reached out and caught his boot!

Oh no, not again! Xie Lian groaned to himself. His terribly bad luck had struck once more. The people before him had crossed the river just fine, but he just had to land on a monster that decided to be difficult—it kept his right ankle in its grip and refused to let him jump!

The empty-shelled people only floated on the lava stream because they were hollow, so they couldn't support much weight. Xie Lian was sweating profusely from the boiling steam, and a corner of his sleeve caught on fire. If he remained where he was, then he and the stepping stone alike were going to sink into the lava, and his whole body would catch ablaze!

Forced to think on his feet amidst imminent peril, an idea came to Xie Lian at the last second. Ruoye flew out and caught another empty-shelled person about three feet ahead, then dragged it over. Xie Lian put his left foot on that shell's back. The two empty shells together could support his weight, increasing his buoyancy so he wouldn't sink. With the crisis averted, Xie Lian unsheathed Fangxin and slashed away the arm that had seized him.

Just as he was about to leap again, a red figure flashed to his side.

"San Lang? I'm okay; you didn't need to come over," Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng palm-blasted the troublesome empty-shelled person into pieces. "Let's talk after we're ashore."

Once they both reached solid ground, Xie Lian said, "Sorry I made you worry."

"It's my fault," Hua Cheng said. "I should've told you to wait for me before I crossed…should've said I'd come back for you."

“All right, all right,” the state preceptor chided. “Break it up. His Highness isn’t that weak; he can handle himself fine without your help. Why did you insist on going to get him? Come! This way.”

Once the group climbed ashore, they kept walking for a while. Eventually, they reached the Palace of Wuyong.

Half of the palace was buried underground. When the group entered, they found that the path slanted downward, leading them straight into the deep recesses of the earth. The scorching air gradually cooled as they left the surface.

The underground palace was completely empty—even the smallest movement echoed and reverberated.

Each member of the group ignited a palm torch to illuminate their surroundings. Although the palace had been sealed for a long time, it was still quite majestic and sumptuous—the firelight reflected upon shimmering golden patterns, sculpted beams, and painted walls. However, the lack of any living souls made the atmosphere feel dead, like a massive mausoleum.

“This is where His Highness grew up,” the state preceptor explained.

“Is he really here?” Mu Qing asked.

“What do you think?” the state preceptor replied. “This is where his powers are the strongest, so watch yourselves.”

Just then, Xie Lian noticed something.

On Hua Cheng’s waist, the silver eyeball on Eming’s hilt was spinning rapidly with unusual agitation. However, Hua Cheng’s expression was still cool and focused, as if he was ignoring it completely. Xie Lian couldn’t help but reach out to pet it, and only then did Eming calm somewhat. When Hua Cheng glanced down and saw Xie Lian’s hand still resting on the hilt, he smiled. But just as he was about to make a comment, cackling laughter echoed from the corners of the great hall.

It was the laugh of a middle-aged man, sly and cunning like it had just come up with a scheme. It made the hairs on Xie Lian's neck stand on end—and reminded him that he'd heard that voice before.

It was the voice of the fetus spirit!

"Over there!" Mu Qing shouted, then tossed a ball of flame to brighten the space above them.

A white lump was pressed into one high corner of the palace ceiling like a gecko—it was the fetus spirit! Its long, bright red tongue was licking its own back like it was scratching an itch. When it saw the flames come flying nearby, it snickered and hurled something that resembled vomit at Mu Qing. Mu Qing dodged the attack, his expression full of contempt.

The state preceptor looked at the sticky mess on the ground, then looked at the fetus spirit above. "Is that really the child of that brat Feng Xin?" he said in disgust.

"Wait! Cuocuo! You're named Cuocuo, right?" Xie Lian quickly called out.

When the fetus spirit heard its name, it paused for a moment and turned to look at him.

"Cuocuo, we've come to find…to find…to find your dad," Xie Lian said. "Do you know where he is?"

When the fetus spirit heard "your dad," it snorted. It scuttled away on all four limbs and disappeared.

"Cuocuo? Quick, find it!" Xie Lian called out.

The group burned their palm torches brighter and searched.

Suddenly, Mu Qing exclaimed, “That way?”

“Which way?” Xie Lian responded.

“I saw it go down there just now,” Mu Qing said.

He was pointing at a hallway coming off one wall—it was a long, narrow corridor, thick with a haunting, gloomy air. Even if they didn’t know where it led, it obviously wouldn’t be anywhere good.

“Did you really see it go there?” Hua Cheng suddenly said.

“What good would it do me to lie to you?” Mu Qing replied with irritation, probably feeling that he was being targeted.

“Ha.” Hua Cheng gave a brusque laugh that contained no emotion and didn’t sound friendly.

“What are you two fighting about at a time like this?” the state preceptor chided. “Let’s go check it out—and don’t overlook anything suspicious.”

The long corridor was very narrow—it must’ve been much wider at some point, but it had been crushed since then, and now only one person could pass at a time. Perhaps Mu Qing still felt indignant about the doubt in Hua Cheng’s voice earlier, as he took the lead. Naturally, Hua Cheng walked in front of Xie Lian to open the path for him, but Xie Lian noticed that Eming’s eye was spinning wildly again at Hua Cheng’s waist. Something clicked in his mind, and he quickly pulled Hua Cheng behind him.

“What is it?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian cleared his throat. "…Didn't I say that I'd protect you? Stay behind me."

Hua Cheng laughed softly.

And so the four of them entered the corridor. Xie Lian felt increasingly uncomfortable as they moved forward—his instincts were extremely acute when it came to danger, and whatever had set them off was right ahead of them.

"Master, do you remember where this path leads?" Xie Lian asked. "Why is it that the more we walk, the more I sense a very heavy…"

Murderous aura.

And it wasn't a hot fury but a very cold, frozen one. The deeper they went, the tenser Xie Lian became.

The state preceptor did not answer him. Xie Lian's heart stopped for a moment, and he raised his voice to ask again.

"Master?"

Still no answer. Xie Lian whipped his head around only to discover that there was not a soul behind him! When did that happen?!

He hadn't noticed sooner because both palm torches that Hua Cheng and the state preceptor had released were still floating in the air, shuffling along with him and lighting the way for masters who had now vanished.

Mu Qing turned back to look as well and asked in shock, "Where's Crimson Rain Sought Flower?"

Without another word, Xie Lian headed back the way they came. However, Mu Qing caught him.

“What are you doing? We’re almost there! Besides, do you really think Crimson Rain Sought Flower would go back?”

“No…” Xie Lian replied.

It was scary precisely *because* Hua Cheng would never go back on his own without telling him!

Xie Lian suddenly remembered something he’d been given by Hua Cheng, and he quickly raised his hand to look. The red string on his third finger was still bright and vivid—a clear indicator that Hua Cheng was okay. Xie Lian sighed in relief, but when he remembered the one Hua Cheng had rolled before they came, his eyebrow twitched.

“I doubt you’ll find anything even if you go back,” Mu Qing said. “So why not continue forward and see what’s here? Wouldn’t you be wasting time if you went back, found nothing, and had to come here again?”

Xie Lian was just about to reply, but then he held his breath. “Shh… Listen. What’s that sound?”

Mu Qing listened intently.

They could hear a man breathing deeply and quietly…and it was coming from ahead!

On high alert, they gripped their weapons tightly as they walked. They finally emerged from the long corridor and found themselves in a chamber. Mu Qing carefully felt around, and Xie Lian sent out a small flame with the flick of a finger. It moved forward to illuminate a figure sprawled on the ground.

Xie Lian recognized the man the moment he saw his back. He rushed over. “Feng Xin?!”

He flipped Feng Xin to confirm. The man was covered in burns and gashes, but his life wasn't in danger. Xie Lian patted him carefully for a little while before he slowly came to. As soon as he woke, he started cursing, but he stopped the moment he realized that Xie Lian was before him.

"Your Highness? Why are you here?"

Xie Lian huffed. "Why don't you tell me where we are?"

Feng Xin sat up and looked around. "…Where *are* we?"

As expected, Feng Xin didn't know either, so Xie Lian asked no more questions. Shaking his head, he reached out.

"Get up first. Now that we've found you, we've got to look for San Lang too."

"Are you talking about Crimson Rain Sought Flower?" Feng Xin asked. "What happened to him? He's not with you?"

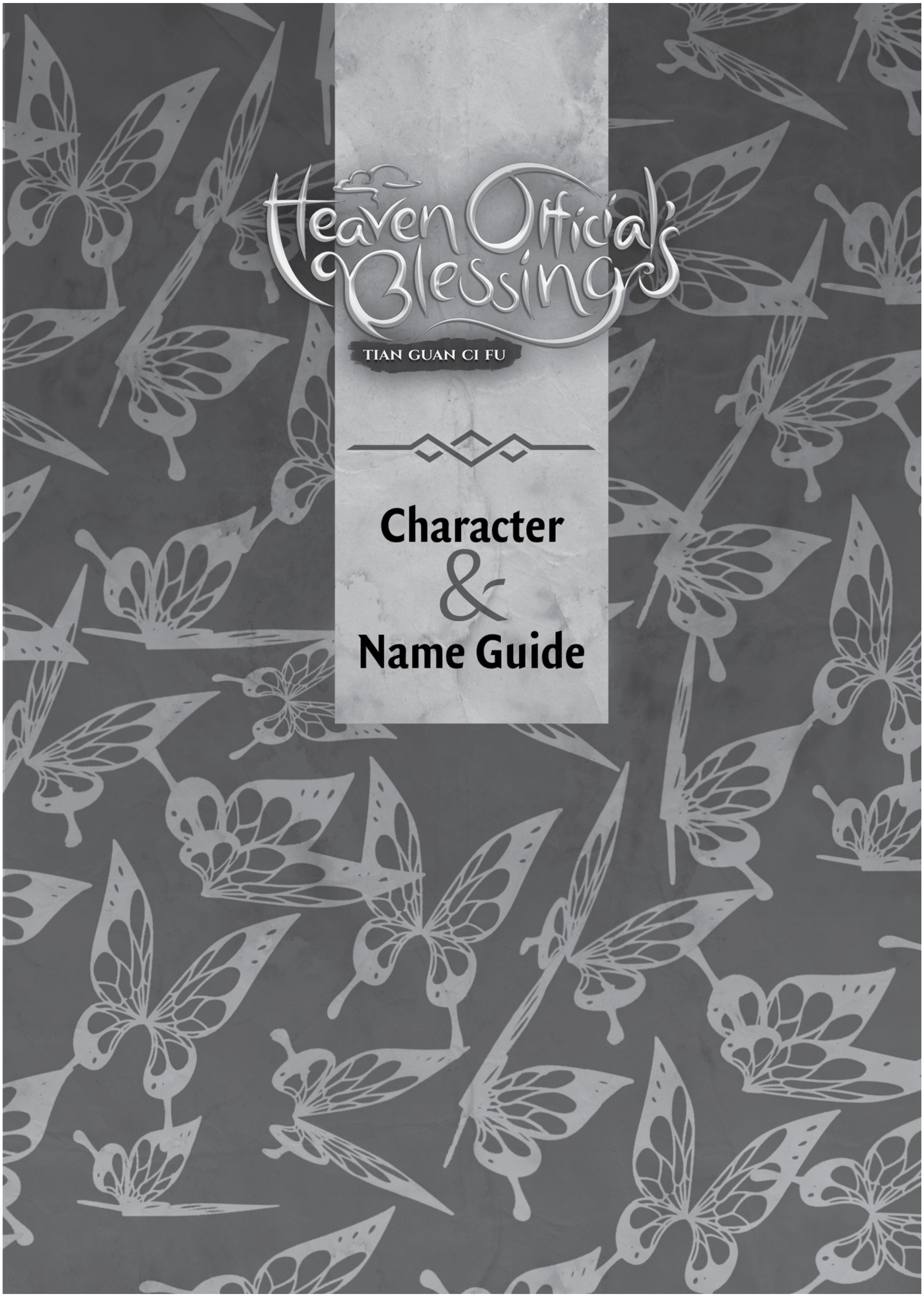
"It's like this," Xie Lian started. "We were together—"

Before he finished, Feng Xin raised a hand. "Wait! Who's that behind you?!"

Xie Lian looked back but only saw an unmoving figure in the shadows. "That's Mu Qing. What's wrong?"

Feng Xin's pupils suddenly shrank. "Seize him, *quickly!*"

THE STORY CONCLUDES IN
Heaven Official's Blessing
VOLUME 8



Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

Character & Name Guide

Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible readings presented for your reference and should not be considered a definitive translation.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Xie Lian

谢怜 "THANK/WILT," "SYMPATHY/LOVE"

Heavenly Title: Xianle, "Heaven's Delight" (仙乐)

Four Famous Tales Title: The Prince Who Pleased God

Once the crown prince of the Kingdom of Xianle and the darling of the heavens, now a very unlucky twice-fallen god who ekes out a meager living collecting scraps. As his bad luck tends to affect those around him for the worse, Xie Lian has spent his last eight hundred years wandering in solitude. Still, he's accepted his lonely lot in life, or at least seems to have a sense of humor about it. Even for the perpetually unlucky, there's always potential for a chance encounter that can turn eight hundred years of unhappiness around.

Xie Lian has seen and done many things over his very long life and originally ascended as a martial god. While it was his scrap-collecting that saw him ascend for the third time, Xie Lian’s feats of physicality are hardly anything to scoff at…though he’d sooner use them as part of a busking performance than to win a fight.

His title Xianle is a multi-layered nickname. “Xianle” is Xie Lian’s official heavenly title and also the name of his kingdom. “Xianle” itself can translate to “Heaven’s Delight,” which ties into Xie Lian’s “Four Famous Tales” moniker, “The Prince Who Pleased God.” Jun Wu referring to Xie Lian as “Xianle” sounds professional and businesslike on the surface (as Jun Wu generally refers to gods by their heavenly titles only), but it deliberately and not-so-subtly comes across as an affectionate term of endearment.

Hua Cheng

花城 “FLOWER,” “CITY”

Four Calamities Title: Crimson Rain Sought Flower

The fearsome king of ghosts and terror of the heavens. Dressed in his signature red, he controls vicious swarms of silver butterflies and wields the cursed scimitar known as Eming. His power and wealth are unmatched in the Three Realms, and for this he has as many worshippers as he does enemies (with considerable crossover between categories). He rules over the dazzling and otherworldly Ghost City in the Ghost Realm and is known to drop in to spectate at its infamous Gambler’s Den when he’s in a good mood.

In spite of all this, when it comes to Xie Lian, the Ghost King shows a much kinder and more respectful side of himself. He does not hesitate for a moment to sleep on a single straw mat in Xie Lian’s humble home, nor to get his hands dirty doing household chores at Puqi Shrine. That being said, it's impossible to deny that as he and Xie Lian grow closer, Hua Cheng seems to be growing more and more mischievous… From the very start, his secret identity as San Lang seemed to be no secret at all to Xie Lian, but Xie Lian still calls him by this name at Hua Cheng's request.

Hua Cheng crossed paths with Xie Lian multiple times during his early life. First, during his childhood as a mistreated street urchin known as Honghong-er, Xie Lian saved his life when he fell from the city walls and showed him rare kindness afterward. Next, as a young soldier in the Xianle army, he did his best to protect Xie Lian at great personal risk as war raged on. Although Xie Lian never learned his name or saw his face under the bandages he refused to remove, the young soldier caught his attention with his remarkable sword skills. Finally, after Hua Cheng's death on the battlefield, he stuck by Xie Lian in the form of an unusually stubborn ghost fire who did its best to help Xie Lian despite its powerlessness. Throughout all the pain of his early life, Hua Cheng's interactions with Xie Lian were a rare bright spot, and he remains intensely protective of Xie Lian to the present day.

Wuming

無名 "NAMELESS"

A nameless ghost in an ever-smiling mask. He seems to have been following Xie Lian since the bygone days of Xianle, though Xie Lian was unaware of his fealty at the time. He is staggeringly powerful and absolutely loyal to Xie Lian's command.

Wuming has lingered as a ghost for the sake of the one he loves. He seeks to avenge the suffering his beloved endured at the hands of humanity and protect them from further harm—even though they likely don’t even know his name. Whoever his beloved might be, they are truly fortunate to garner such devotion.

HEAVENLY OFFICIALS & HEAVENLY ASSOCIATES

Feng Xin

风信 “WIND,” “TRUST/FAITH”

Heavenly Title: Nan Yang, “Southern Sun” (南陽)

The Martial God of the Southeast. He has a short fuse and foul mouth (especially when it comes to his longstanding nemesis, Mu Qing) but is known to be a dutiful, hardworking god. He has a complicated history with Xie Lian: long ago, in their days in the Kingdom of Xianle, he used to serve as Xie Lian’s bodyguard and was a close friend until circumstances drove them apart.

In order to follow Xie Lian in secret, Feng Xin created an undercover identity for himself: Nan Feng, a Middle Court official. This failed to fool Xie Lian from the start, not in the least due to Feng Xin’s completely unchanged personality and questionable ability to create a believable pseudonym: “Nan” / 南 is the same character as in Feng Xin’s heavenly title, and “Feng” / 风 is the same character as in Feng Xin’s proper name.

Jun Wu

君吾 “LORD,” “I”

Heavenly Title: Shenwu, “Divine Might” (神武)

The Emperor of Heaven and strongest of the gods. He is composed and serene, and it is through his power and wisdom that the heavens remain aloft—quite literally. Although the heavens are full of schemers and gossipmongers, Jun Wu stands apart from such petty squabbles and is willing to listen to even the lowliest creatures to hear their pleas for justice. Despite this reputation for fairness, he does have his biases. In further contrast to the rest of the rabble in Heaven, he shows great patience and affection toward Xie Lian to the point that many grumble about favoritism.

Ling Wen

灵文 “INGENIOUS LITERATUS”

Heavenly Title: Ling Wen

The top civil god and also the most overworked. Unlike the majority of gods, she is addressed by her colleagues and most others by her heavenly title. She is one of the rare female civil gods and worked tirelessly (and thanklessly) for many years to earn her position. Ling Wen is exceedingly competent at all things bureaucratic, and her work keeps Heaven’s business running (mostly) smoothly. She is the creator and head admin of Heaven’s communication array.

These days, her name Nangong Jie [南宫杰, “South” 南 / “Palace” 宫 / “Hero” 杰] is only used by her close friend Pei Ming—though he usually calls her the friendly nickname “Noble Jie.” She is also close to Shi Wudu, who is known in the heavens for his self-serving personality. Their friend group is dubbed the “Three Tumors.”

Mu Qing

慕情 “YEARNING,” “AFFECTION”

Heavenly Title: Xuan Zhen, “Enigmatic Truth” (玄真)

The Martial God of the Southwest. He has a short fuse and sharp tongue (especially when it comes to his longstanding nemesis, Feng Xin) and is known for being cold, spiteful, and petty. He has a complicated history with Xie Lian: long ago, in their days in the Kingdom of Xianle, he used to serve as Xie Lian's personal servant and was a close friend until circumstances drove them apart.

In order to follow Xie Lian in secret, Mu Qing created an undercover identity for himself: Fu Yao, a Middle Court official. This failed to fool Xie Lian from the start, not in the least due to Mu Qing's completely unchanged personality and self-aggrandizing naming tendencies: "Fu Yao" / 扶摇 is a figure of speech for someone who is skilled or ambitious.

Pei Ming

裴茗 SURNAME PEI, "TENDER TEA LEAVES"

Heavenly Title: Ming Guang, "Bright Illumination" (明光)

Four Famous Tales Title: The General Who Snapped His Sword

The Martial God of the North. General Pei is a powerful and popular god, and over the years he has gained a reputation as a womanizer. This reputation is deserved: Pei Ming's ex-lovers are innumerable and hail from all the Three Realms. He is close friends with Ling Wen and Shi Wudu, who are also known in the heavens for their self-serving personalities. This friend group is dubbed the "Three Tumors."

Pei Xiu is Pei Ming's indirect descendant, and Pei Ming took him under his wing to help advance his career in the heavens. He was very displeased when Pei Xiu ruined that career for Banyue's sake, but he seems to have accepted the situation and does not hold a grudge against Xie Lian for his involvement in uncovering the scandal.

Pei Xiu

裴宿 SURNAME PEI, “CONSTELLATION”

Heavenly Title: N/A

An exiled martial god and a distant (and indirect) descendant of Pei Ming. He’s usually called “Little Pei” or “General Pei Junior” for this reason. He is often called in to clean up after his ancestor’s messes, but regardless of the circumstances, he always maintains his composure with a polite yet detached air. His ascension to godhood occurred because he led the charge to slaughter the Kingdom of Banyue, and his exile from godhood occurred because of his morally dubious attempts to save his childhood friend Banyue from her fate of eternal punishment.

Quan Yizhen

权一真 “POWER/AUTHORITY,” “ONE,” “TRUTH/GENUINE”

Heavenly Title: Qi Ying, “Stupendous Hero” (奇英)

The (current) Martial God of the West. He previously shared this title with his shixiong, Yin Yu. After Yin Yu was banished from heaven, Quan Yizhen holds the title alone. He still yearns for his shixiong’s companionship and is convinced that their falling-out was caused by a misunderstanding.

Quan Yizhen has a single-minded focus on martial arts and is considered a prodigy even among heaven’s elite. He also has a reputation for beating up his own followers, though this somehow does not damage his popularity in the Mortal Realm. While his skill cannot be disparaged, he is widely disliked in the heavens for his lack of social etiquette. He cares not for the friendship or opinions of his fellow gods, though he has warmed up to Xie Lian.

Rain Master

雨师篁 “RAIN,” "MASTER," "BAMBOO GROVE"

Heavenly Title: Rain Master

The elemental master of rain, proper name Yushi Huang. Ascended to the heavens shortly before Xie Lian’s own first ascension. The Rain Master is a reclusive heavenly official who is known to reside on a secluded mountain farm named Yushi Country (雨师乡) with many subordinates working in the fields. One of these subordinates is an intelligent talking ox, who is also capable of transforming into a human form that’s equally as beefy as his bovine build.

While the Rain Master prefers a quiet and modest life of agriculture, any nefarious creature that’s foolish enough to target the domain’s farm hands is in for a very rude awakening indeed…

Shi Qingxuan

师青玄 “MASTER,” “VERDANT GREEN/BLUE,” “MYSTERIOUS/BLACK”

Heavenly Title: Wind Master

Four Famous Tales Title: The Young Lord Who Poured Wine

The elemental master of wind and younger sibling of the Water Master, Shi Wudu. Shi Qingxuan ascended as a male god, but over the years, he began to be worshipped as a female version of himself. Shi Qingxuan eagerly embraced this, and she leaps at any opportunity to go out on the town in her female form…and will try to drag anyone she's traveling with into the fun.

Shi Qingxuan is as flighty and pushy as the element they command, and as wealthy as they are generous with their money. They possess a strong sense of justice and will not be dissuaded by notions of propriety. They appear to be close friends with the Earth Master Ming Yi, despite the latter's insistence to the contrary.

GHOST REALM & GHOST REALM ASSOCIATES

Bai Jing

白锦 “WHITE BROCADE”

The human spirit fused with the Brocade Immortal. He was once a young man with immense talent in martial arts who was destined for godhood. However, his life was gruesomely cut short when the girl he was in love with manipulated him into dismembering himself. That girl was Nangong Jie, better known as Ling Wen.

Banyue

半月 “HALF-MOON”

Former state preceptor of the Kingdom of Banyue, now a wrath ghost. She is a scrawny young woman who nonetheless possesses the power to call upon and control deadly scorpion-snakes. Despite her gloomy disposition, she earnestly wishes to save others from suffering, even if it means that she has to suffer in their stead.

Cuocuo

错错 “MISTAKE” (A CHILDISH TERM, LIKE “OOPSIE”)

A malice-level ghost resembling a monstrous-looking human fetus. It targets pregnant women and seeks to usurp the place of the children in their wombs—killing both mother and unborn child in the process. Its mother is Lan Chang (also known as Jian Lan), and its father is none other than Feng Xin. That being said, Cuocuo clearly doesn’t consider Feng Xin worthy of filial respect, and Feng Xin cannot bear acknowledging such a creature as his own son.

He Xuan

贺玄 “CONGRATULATE,” “BLACK,” “MYSTERIOUS”

Four Calamities Title: Ship-Sinking Black Water

One of the Four Calamities, Ship-Sinking Black Water. He is a mysterious and reclusive water ghost who rules the South Sea. Like Hua Cheng, he won the bloody gauntlet at Mount Tonglu and wields the power of a supreme ghost. He is consumed by ceaseless hunger and is driven by an equally consuming lust for revenge.

He Xuan disguised himself as the Earth Master Ming Yi for many centuries, and during this masquerade he cultivated a friendship with Shi Qingxuan. Although founded on falsehood, the feelings of friendship that “Ming-xiong” held for Shi Qingxuan seemed to be legitimate.

Black Water has a strange relationship with Hua Cheng. The two can hardly be considered friends, but they frequently work together to further their own personal interests—He Xuan was Hua Cheng’s spy in the heavens for centuries, and in return, Hua Cheng loaned him large sums of money and resources. Despite providing essential intel over the years, He Xuan remains deep in debt to him.

Kemo

刻磨 “MILLSTONE”

A former general of the Kingdom of Banyue, now a wrath-level ghost. He bears great resentment against the State Preceptor of Banyue, even after his own death, and great hatred for the long-dead kingdom that destroyed his own.

Lan Chang

蘭菖 “GLADIOLUS [FLOWER]”

A malice-level ghost. Formerly a prostitute in Ghost City and now on the run with her monstrous child, the fetus spirit Cuocuo. She is hardly as delicate as her floral name implies—when it comes to throwing insults around on the streets of Ghost City, she can give as good as she gets. In Chinese flower language, the gladiolus flower means “tryst” (for romantic rendezvous) and also “absence.” She was formerly known as Jian Lan (剑兰), which is another term for the same flower.

Jian Lan was once a citizen of Xianle, and no ordinary one at that—her family was wealthy and influential, and she was even briefly in the running to be named the crown prince’s consort. After the fall of Xianle, she was forced into service at a brothel, where she conceived Cuocuo during a brief doomed romance with Feng Xin. An unknown assailant targeted her and carved her unborn son out of her stomach to forge him into a monster, killing Jian Lan in the process and causing her to linger in the living world as a vengeful ghost.

Lang Ying (Ghost Child)

郎萤 “YOUTH,” “FIREFLY”

A mysterious ghost child afflicted with Human Face Disease. He has known nothing but abuse for hundreds of years due to his horrifying appearance, save for the fleeting kindness and warmth of the human girl Xiao-Ying. The combination of this trauma and his almost total lack of human interaction has left him mostly mute and constantly on high alert. Xie Lian was the one to give him this name: Lang being the national surname of Yong'an, and Ying to commemorate the girl who once took care of him.

Qi Rong

戚容 "FACE OF SORROW" OR "RELATIVE," "TOLERANCE/FACE"

Four Calamities Title: Night-Touring Green Lantern

One of the Four Calamities, also called the "Green Ghost." Unlike the other three Calamities, he's actually only a wrath ghost, not a supreme. Gods and ghosts alike agree that he was only included in the group to bump up the number to an even four. (Also, he's just that big a pest.) He is infamous for his crude behavior and ostentatious attempts to copy the style of the more successful Calamities, as well as for his ravenous appetite for human flesh.

More recently, his crimes have expanded to include kidnapping and body-snatching. In an attempt to hide from heaven's detection, he possessed the body of a human man and in doing so acquired a young son named Guzi.

Qi Rong is Xie Lian's younger cousin on his mother's side, much to Xie Lian's everlasting dismay. Surprising no one, Qi Rong has been a source of stress and trouble ever since their mortal childhoods in Xianle. His royal title in Xianle was Prince Xiao Jing.

Rong Guang

容广 “APPEARANCE/TOLERATE,” “VAST/NUMEROUS”

A former military officer of the fallen Kingdom of Xuli. He was once Pei Ming’s right-hand man and close friend; they were close enough for General Pei to name his sword “Mingguang,” a portmanteau of their names. However, he now seeks revenge against Pei Ming as a malice-level ghost fused with that same broken sword.

White No-Face

白无相 “WHITE NO-FACE”

Four Calamities Title: White-Clothed Calamity

One of the Four Calamities, White No-Face is mysterious, cruel, and powerful enough to battle with the Heavenly Emperor himself—truly, a supreme among supremes. He destroyed the Kingdom of Xianle with the Human Face Disease pandemic. His peculiar fixation on Xie Lian is unnerving, as are his equally peculiar displays of affection.

Xuan Ji

宣姬 “DECLARE,” “PROCLAIM” / “CONCUBINE [ARCHAIC]”

A former general of the Kingdom of Yushi, now a wrath-level ghost. Also known as the Ghost Bride. She is obsessed with Pei Ming, who rejected her affections after she tried to take their physical-only relationship to the next level. Her fury at being scorned led to the gruesome deaths of many happy brides-to-be and her eventual imprisonment under heavenly law.

Yin Yu

引玉 “ATTRACT,” “JADE”

Yin Yu, also known as the Waning Moon Officer (下弦月使), is Hua Cheng’s right-hand man, subordinate, and all-around errand runner. He has been described by some as having a very weak sense of presence and a forgettable appearance. He bears a cursed shackle on his wrist, which marks him as a banished heavenly official. Yin Yu is the former Martial God of the West, who was cast out of Heaven after an incident where he endangered the life of his shidi, Quan Yizhen. He has mixed feelings toward his shidi, and even more mixed feelings over said shidi’s dogged insistence on rekindling their former friendship.

Yin Yu’s name is taken from the idiom 抛砖引玉/ “pao zhuan yin yu,” or “throwing out a brick to attract a jade.” It describes the act of making a rudimentary suggestion that is intended to prompt others to come forward with better ideas.

MORTAL REALM & MORTAL REALM ASSOCIATES

Guzi

谷子 “MILLET”

A young human child who Qi Rong kidnapped as a byproduct of stealing the body of the boy’s father. Because Qi Rong is possessing Guzi’s father, the poor little boy seems blissfully unaware that he’s in any danger at all, though that hardly prevents him from enduring plenty of suffering at Qi Rong’s hands.

Lang Ying

郎英 “YOUTH,” “HERO”

A Yong’an man who Xie Lian made the acquaintance of in the Xianle era. He is a troubled man who has lost much—some might say everything—to the drought and famine that struck his home region. After toppling the Kingdom of Xianle in a bloody civil war, he was named king of the new Kingdom of Yong’an.

Heaven’s Eye

天眼开 “HEAVEN’S EYE”

A wealthy, pompous human cultivator who leads a team of cultivators with a similar member profile. Despite his personality flaws, his powers are the real deal. His third eye can see the unseen, and in the process inadvertently reveal exactly how you’ve been “borrowing spiritual energy” recently.

Mei Nianqing

梅念卿 "PLUM BLOSSOM" / "TO LECTURE," "TO LONG FOR" / FRIENDLY DIMINUTIVE BETWEEN SPOUSES/CLOSE FRIENDS (ALSO USED BY EMPERORS TOWARD THEIR MINISTERS)

A mysterious and powerful cultivator who specializes in the art of astrological divination. He is very easily distracted by the allure of a game of cards.

In the Xianle era, he was the leader of a quartet of cultivators who served as the kingdom's state preceptors—however, he was not a Xianle native, and he deliberately obscured his true origins and age. He was the religious leader and head instructor at the Royal Holy Temple, Xianle's premiere cultivation school and largest place of worship for several gods. Mei Nianqing had a close relationship with his most cherished student (and his biggest headache), Xie Lian.

The plum blossom in Mei Nianqing's name is a symbol of endurance in Chinese flower language, as it blooms in the depths of winter. The plum blossom is also one of the four flowers of the junzi (the ideal Confucian gentleman).

Xianle Royal Family

The king and queen of the Kingdom of Xianle, and Xie Lian's parents. Xie Lian's father is of the ruling Xie (谢 "to thank/to wilt") clan, and his mother is of the Min (悯 "to feel pity for/commiserate with") clan. Xie Lian is very close with his mother, who is a doting—if rather naive and sheltered—parent. Xie Lian has a more contentious relationship with his father and frequently squabbles with him.

When Xie Lian’s given name (怜 / lian) and his mother’s clan name (悯 / min) are written together, they form the word “compassion” (怜悯 / lianmin).

SENTIENT WEAPONS AND SPIRITUAL OBJECTS

Brocade Immortal

锦衣仙 “BROCADE,” “IMMORTAL”

A semi-sentient brocade robe possessed by the ghost of a human man, Bai Jing. The name of this object is meant to be a play on the name of the spirit of the man who inhabits it. The Brocade Immortal is an immensely powerful and dangerous artifact—those who wear it can be controlled like puppets if they were given the robe by a person with nefarious intent, and even gods are not immune to its effect.

Eming

厄命 “TERRIBLE/WRETCHED,” “FATE”

Hua Cheng’s sentient scimitar. With a single bloodred eye that peers out from its silver hilt, it is a cursed blade that drinks the blood of its victims and is the bane of the heavens. It enjoys nothing more than receiving praise and hugs from Xie Lian, and its childish, forward personality is a great embarrassment to its ghostly master.

Fangxin

芳心 “AFFECTIONS OF A YOUNG WOMAN”

An ancient black sword with ties to Xie Lian. An antique, it easily tires when dealing with high-flying heavenly adventures. Xie Lian used the sword’s name as an alias while serving as the State Preceptor of Yong’an.

Mingguang

明光

Pei Ming’s famously broken sword named after a portmanteau of the sounds from Pei Ming and Rong Guang’s names. Rong Guang fused with it to seek revenge.

Ruoye

若邪 “LIKE/AS IF,” “EVIL” OR “SWORD”

Xie Lian’s sentient strip of white silk. It is an earnest and energetic sort, if a bit nervous sometimes, and will go to great lengths to protect Xie Lian—quite literally, as it can stretch out to almost limitless dimensions.

Locations

Heavenly Realm

The Heavenly Capital is a divine city built upon the clouds. Amidst flowing streams and auspicious clouds, luxurious palaces dot the landscape, serving as the personal residences and offices of the gods. The Grand Avenue of Divine Might serves as the realm's main thoroughfare, and this road leads directly to the Palace of Divine Might—the Heavenly Emperor's residence where court is held.

The Heavenly Court consists of two sub-courts: the Upper Court and the Middle Court. The Upper Court consists entirely of ascended gods, while the Middle Court consists of officials who—while remarkable and skilled in their own right—have not yet ascended to godhood.

Mortal Realm

The realm of living humans. Often receives visitors from the other two realms.

Kingdom of Xianle

仙乐 "HEAVEN'S DELIGHT" OR "HEAVENLY MUSIC"

A fallen kingdom, once glamorous and famed for its riches and its people's love for the finer things in life—such as art, music, gold, and the finest thing of all, their beloved crown prince, Xie Lian. Xianle's gilded exterior masked a declining kingdom plagued by corruption, and Xie Lian's meddling hastened its inevitable collapse in a most disastrous fashion.

Xianle’s largest cultivation center, the Royal Holy Temple, sprawled across the peaks of the auspicious Mount Taicang. Its qi-rich landscape nurtures the blanketing forests of fruit trees and flame-red maples. The mountain hosted the kingdom’s largest Palace of Xianle for worship of Xie Lian after his ascension, and the Xianle Imperial Mausoleum is located far underground.

Kingdom of Wuyong

乌庸 “CROW/BLACK,” “MEDIOCRE/ORDINARY/TO HIRE”

An ancient kingdom that was destroyed over two thousand years ago in a volcanic apocalypse and wiped from the annals of history. Mount Tonglu looms at the center of this once-prosperous realm, forever brewing chaos and destruction within its fiery womb. Wuyong is sealed within an evil domain that only opens when Mount Tonglu issues its call to slaughter. Its landscape and remaining wildlife have been distorted by the enormously evil power that periodically spews from the depths of the mountain. However, one just might be able to piece together the remaining fragments of its shattered civilization and learn the truth about what took place during its last days…

Kingdom of Yong’an

永安 “ETERNAL PEACE”

A fallen but once-prosperous kingdom. Yong’an began its existence as an impoverished city located within the Kingdom of Xianle. It later became a powder keg of social unrest, which kicked off a lengthy and bloody civil war that eventually resulted in Xianle’s end.

The Kingdom of Yong’an rose out of the ashes of the Kingdom of Xianle after the latter’s collapse, but it very soon fell to the very same corruption and excess that doomed Xianle.

Puqi Village

菩荠村 “WATER CHESTNUT”

A tiny village in the countryside, named for the water chestnuts *(puqi)* that grow in abundance nearby. While small and unsophisticated, its villagers are friendly and welcoming to weary travelers who wish to stay a while. The humble Puqi Shrine—under reconstruction and welcoming donations—can be found here, as well as its resident god, Xie Lian.

Ghost Realm

The Ghost Realm is the home of almost all dead humans, and far less organized and bureaucratic than the Heavenly Realm. Ghosts may leave or be trapped away from the Ghost Realm under some circumstances, which causes major problems for ordinary humans and gods alike.

Black Water Demon Lair

The domain of the reclusive Supreme Ghost King who rules the South Sea, Ship-Sinking Black Water. If one is unfortunate enough to wander into his territory, it will quickly become their final resting place. Should they avoid being eaten alive by the colossal skeletal fish that serve as threshold guardians, the sea itself will devour them instead. Nothing can float upon the waters of the Black Water Demon Lair—all intruders are forfeit to the abyss.

It is said that Ship-Sinking Black Water dwells on Black Water Island, located at the heart of his realm. His residence on the island is called the Nether Water Manor. In stark contrast to Hua Cheng's lively Ghost City, Black Water Island is a silent, gloomy place with few residents other than the master himself.

Ghost City

The largest city in the Ghost Realm, founded and ruled by Hua Cheng. It is a dazzling den of vice, sin, and all things wicked, which makes it the number-one spot for visitors from all three realms to shop for nefarious goods and cavort under the glow of the blood-red lanterns.

Hua Cheng is rarely present in the city and does not often make public appearances. On the occasion he is in the mood to do so, he is met with considerable adoration; clearly, Ghost City's citizens love their Chengzhu and respect him immensely. His residence within the city is the secluded Paradise Manor, which has never seen guests—at least until Xie Lian came to call, of course.

The city is also home to the beautiful, secluded Thousand Lights Temple, which Hua Cheng dedicated to Xie Lian for reasons the man seems reluctant to elaborate on. It serves double-duty as a place of worship and private school of calligraphy, though Xie Lian doesn't seem to be making much progress on teaching Hua Cheng to write legibly.

Other/Unknown

Mount Tonglu

铜炉山 “COPPER KILN MOUNTAIN”

Mount Tonglu is a volcano within the domain of the fallen Kingdom of Wuyong, and the location of the Kiln, where new ghost kings are born. Every few hundred years, tens of thousands of ghosts descend upon the city for a massive battle royale. Only two ghosts have ever survived the slaughter and made it out—one of those two was Hua Cheng.

Name Guide
Names, Honorifics, & Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

-ER: A word for “son” or “child.” Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone “Little” or “Sonny.”

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

XIAO-: A diminutive meaning “little.” Always a prefix.

Doubling a syllable of a person’s name can be a nickname, and has childish or cutesy connotations.

Family

DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend. Casual.

GE: Familiar way to refer to an older brother or older male friend, used by someone substantially younger or of lower status. Can be used alone or with the person’s name.

GEGE: Familiar way to refer to an older brother or an older male friend, used by someone substantially younger or of lower status. Has a cutesier feel than “ge.”

JIEJIE: Familiar way to refer to an older sister or an older female friend, used by someone substantially younger or of lower status. Has a cutesier feel than “jie,” and rarely used by older males.

MEIMEI: Younger sister or an unrelated younger female friend. Casual.

XIONG: Older brother. Generally used as an honorific. Formal, but also used informally between male friends of equal status.

YIFU: Maternal uncle (husband of maternal aunt), respectful address.

YIMU: Maternal aunt, respectful address.

Cultivation, Martial Arts, and Immortals

-JUN: A suffix meaning "lord."

-ZUN: A suffix meaning "esteemed, venerable." More respectful than "-jun."

DAOZHANG: A polite address for Daoist cultivators, equivalent to "Mr. Cultivator." Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone's family name—for example, one could refer to Xie Lian as "Daozhang" or "Xie Daozhang."

SHIDI: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one's own sect.

SHIFU: Teacher/master. For one's master in one's own sect. Gender neutral. Mostly interchangeable with Shizun.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one's own sect.

YUANJUN: Title for high class female Daoist deity. Can be used alone as a title or as a suffix.

ZHENJUN: Title for average male Daoist deity. Can be used alone as a title or as a suffix.

Other

CHENGZHU: A title for the master/ruler of an independent city-state.

GONGZI: Young master of an affluent household.

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of China. It is a tonal language, so correct pronunciation is vital to being understood! As many readers may not be familiar with the use and sound of tonal marks, below is a very simplified guide on the pronunciation of select character names and terms from MXTX's series to help get you started.

More resources are available at ***sevenseasdanmei.com***

Series Names

SCUM VILLAIN'S SELF-SAVING SYSTEM (RÉN ZHĀ FAˇN PÀI ZÌ JIÙ XÌ TOˇNG):

ren jaa faan pie zzh zioh she tone

GRANDMASTER OF DEMONIC CULTIVATION (MÓ DÀO ZUˇ SHĪ):

mwuh dow zoo shrr

HEAVEN OFFICIAL'S BLESSING (TIĀN GUĀN CÌ FÚ):

tee-yan gwen tsz fuu

Character Names

SHĚN QĪNGQIŪ: Shhen Ching-cheeoh

LUÒ BĪNGHÉ: Loo-uh Bing-huhh

WÈI WÚXIÀN: Way Woo-shee-ahn

LÁN WÀNGJĪ: Lahn Wong-gee

XIÈ LIÁN: Shee-yay Lee-yan

HUĀ CHÉNG: Hoo-wah Cch-yung

XIAˇO-: shee-ow

-ER: ahrr

A-: ah

GŌNGZIˇ: gong-zzh

DÀOZHAˇNG: dow-jon

-JŪN: june

DÌDÌ: dee-dee

GĒGĒ: guh-guh

JIĚJIĚ: gee-ay-gee-ay

MÈIMEI: may-may

-XIÓNG: shong

Terms

DĀNMĚI: dann-may

WUˇXIÁ: woo-sheeah

XIĀNXIÁ: sheeyan-sheeah

QÌ: chee

General Consonants & Vowels

X: similar to English sh (**sh**eep)

Q: similar to English ch (**ch**arm)

C: similar to English ts (pan**ts**)

IU: yoh

UO: wuh

ZHI: jrr

CHI: chrr

SHI: shrr

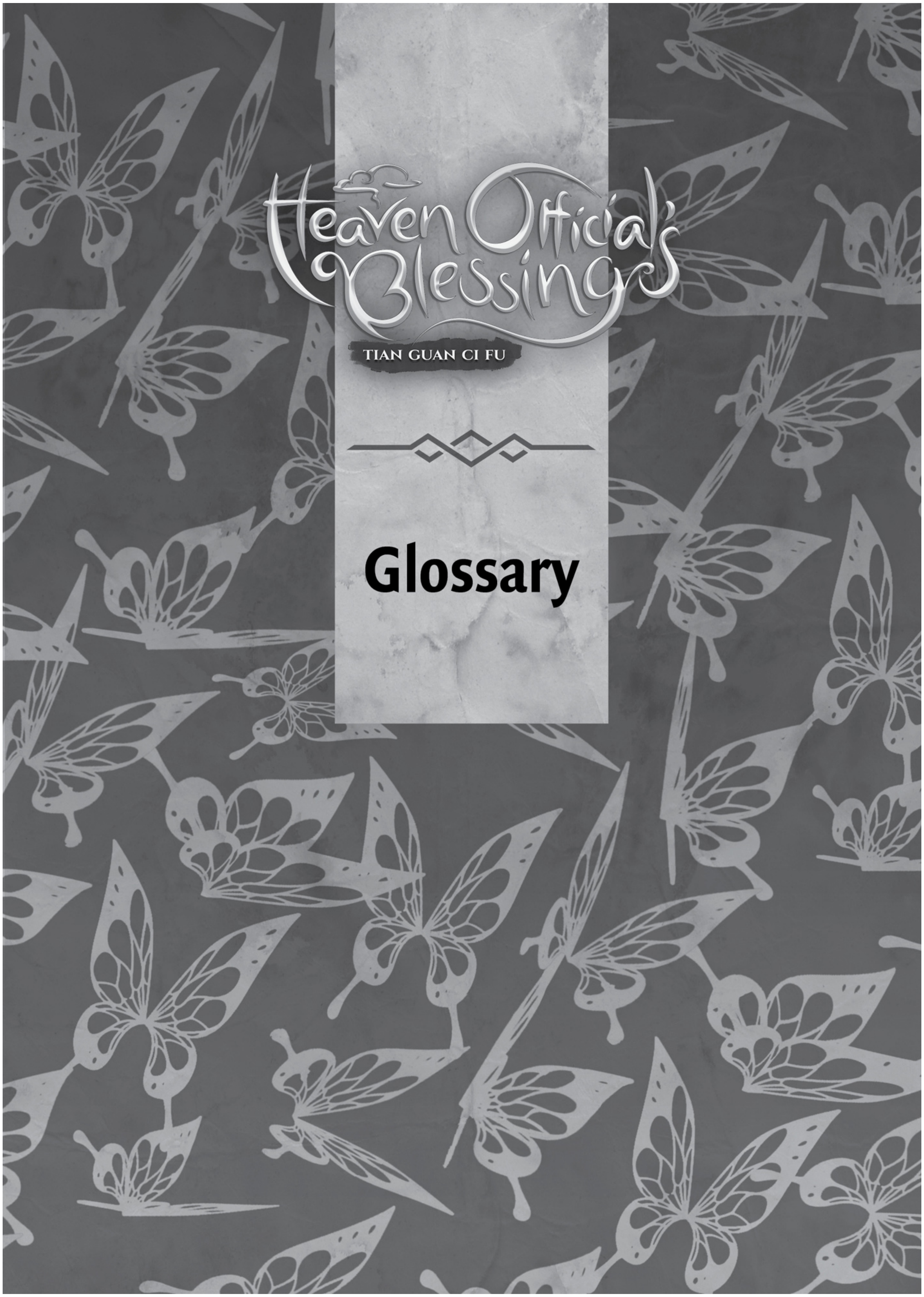
RI: rrr

ZI: zzz

CI: tsz

SI: ssz

U: When u follows a y, j, q, or x, the sound is actually ü, pronounced like eee with your lips rounded like ooo. This applies for yu, yuan, jun, etc.



Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

Glossary

Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context to the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel and provide a starting point for learning more about the rich Chinese culture from which these stories were written.

China is home to dozens of cultures, and its history spans thousands of years. The provided definitions are not strictly universal across all these cultural groups, and this simplified overview is meant for new readers unfamiliar with the concepts. This glossary should not be considered a definitive source, especially for more complex ideas.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (耽美 / "indulgence in beauty") is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media. The majority of well-known danmei writers are women writing for women, although all genders produce and enjoy the genre.

Wuxia

Wuxia (武侠 / "martial heroes") is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues, who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and not—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the governing law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (仙侠 / "immortal heroes") is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to become stronger, with the end goal of extending their life span or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story's central focus, it is not xianxia. *The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System*, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *Heaven Official's Blessing* are all considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

Webnovels

Webnovels are novels serialized by chapter online, and the websites that host them are considered spaces for indie and amateur writers. Many novels, dramas, comics, and animated shows produced in China are based on popular webnovels.

Heaven Official's Blessing was first serialized on the website *JJWXC*.

TERMINOLOGY

ARRAY: Area-of-effect magic circles. Anyone within the array falls under the effect of the array's associated spell(s).

ASCENSION: In typical xianxia tales, gods are conceived naturally and born divine. Immortals cannot attain godhood but can achieve great longevity. In *Heaven Official's Blessing,* however, both gods and immortals were born mortal and either cultivated deeply or committed great deeds and attained godhood after transcending the Heavenly Tribulation. Their bodies shed the troubles of a mortal form and are removed from the corporeal world.

AUSPICIOUS CLOUDS: A sign of good fortune and the divine, auspicious clouds are also often seen as methods of transport for gods and immortals in myth. The idea springs from the obvious association with clouds and the sky/heavens, and also because yun (云 / "cloud") and yun (运 / "luck") sound similar.

BOWING: Bowing is a social custom in many Asian nations. There are several varieties of bow in Chinese culture, which are distinguished by how low the bow goes as well as any associated hand gestures. A deeper bow indicates more respect, and those with high social status will always expect a deeper bow from those with low status. The kowtow (see associated glossary entry) is the most respectful level of bow. “Standing down in a bow” means holding a bowing position while leaving someone’s presence.

BUDAOWENG: A budaoweng (不倒翁 / “wobbly old man”) is an oblong doll, weighted so that it rolls back into an upright position whenever it is knocked down.

CHINESE CALENDAR: The Chinese calendar uses the *Tian Gan Di Zhi* (Heavenly Stems, Earthly Branches) system, rather than numbers, to mark the years. There are ten heavenly stems (original meanings lost) and twelve earthly branches (associated with the zodiac), each represented by a written character. Each stem and branch is associated with either yin or yang, and one of the elemental properties: wood, earth, fire, metal, and water. The stems and branches are combined in cyclical patterns to create a calendar where every unit of time is associated with certain attributes.

This is what a character is asking for when inquiring for the date/time of birth (生辰八字 / “eight characters of birth date/time”). Analyzing the stem/branch characters and their elemental associations was considered essential information in divination, fortune-telling, matchmaking, and even business deals.

Colors:

WHITE: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both the deceased and mourners.

BLACK: Represents the Heavens and the Dao.

RED: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

YELLOW/GOLD: Wealth and prosperity, and often reserved for the emperor.

BLUE/GREEN (CYAN): Health, prosperity, and harmony.

PURPLE: Divinity and immortality, often associated with nobility.

CONFUCIANISM: Confucianism is a philosophy based on the teachings of Confucius. Its influence on all aspects of Chinese culture is incalculable. Confucius placed heavy importance on respect for one's elders and family, a concept broadly known as *xiao* (孝 / "filial piety"). The family structure is used in other contexts to urge similar behaviors, such as respect of a student towards a teacher, or people of a country towards their ruler.

COUGHING/SPITTING BLOOD: A way to show a character is ill, injured, or upset. Despite the very physical nature of the response, it does not necessarily mean that a character has been wounded; their body could simply be reacting to a very strong emotion.

(See also Seven Apertures/Qiqiao.)

CULTIVATORS/CULTIVATION: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and martial arts who seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while attaining personal strength and extending their life span. Cultivation is a long process marked by "stages." There are traditionally nine stages, but this is often simplified in fiction. Some common stages are noted below, though exact definitions of each stage may depend on the setting.

- Qi Condensation/Qi Refining (凝气/练气)
- Foundation Establishment (筑基)
- Core Formation/Golden Core (结丹/金丹)
- Nascent Soul (元婴)
- Deity Transformation (化神)
- Great Ascension (大乘)
- Heavenly Tribulation (渡劫)

CULTIVATION MANUAL: Cultivation manuals and sutras are common plot devices in xianxia/wuxia novels. They provide detailed instructions on a secret or advanced training technique and are sought out by those who wish to advance their cultivation levels.

CURRENCY: The currency system during most dynasties was based on the exchange of silver and gold coinage. Weight was also used to measure denominations of money. An example is something being marked with a price of “one liang of silver.”

DAOISM: Daoism is the philosophy of the *dao* (道), known as “the way.” Following the dao involves coming into harmony with the natural order of the universe, which makes someone a “true human,” safe from external harm and who can affect the world without intentional action. Cultivation is a concept based on Daoist beliefs.

DEMONS: A race of immensely powerful and innately supernatural beings. They are almost always aligned with evil.

DISCIPLES: Cultivation sect members are known as disciples. Disciples live on sect grounds and have a strict hierarchy based on skill and seniority. They are divided into Core, Inner, and Outer rankings, with Core being the highest. Higher-ranked disciples get better lodging and other resources.

When formally joining a sect as a disciple or a student, the sect becomes like the disciple's new family: teachers are parents and peers are siblings. Because of this, a betrayal or abandonment of one's sect is considered a deep transgression of Confucian values of filial piety. This is also the origin of many of the honorifics and titles used for martial arts.

DRAGON: Great chimeric beasts who wield power over the weather. Chinese dragons differ from their Western counterparts as they are often benevolent, bestowing blessings and granting luck. They are associated with the heavens, the Emperor, and yang energy.

EIGHT TRIGRAMS MAP: Also known as the bagua or pakua, an eight trigrams map is a Daoist diagram containing eight symbols that represent the fundamentals of reality, including the five elements. They often feature a symbol for yin and yang in the center as a representation of perfect balance between opposing forces.

ENTRANCE COUPLETS: Written poetry verses that are posted outside the door of a building. The two lines of poetry on the sides of the door express the meaning/theme of the establishment, or are a wish for good luck. The horizontal verse on the top summarizes or is the subject of the couplets.

FACE: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as "face," is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person's reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, "having face" refers to having a good reputation, and "losing face" refers to having one's reputation hurt. Meanwhile, "giving face" means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while "not wanting face" implies that a person is acting so poorly/shamelessly that they clearly don't care about their reputation at all. "Thin face" refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, "thick face" refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

FENG SHUI: Literally translates to wind-water. Refers to the natural laws believed to govern the flow of qi in the arrangement of the natural environment and man-made structures. Favorable feng shui and good qi flow have various beneficial effects to everyday life and the practice of cultivation, while the opposite is true for unfavorable feng shui and bad qi flow.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS: Also known as the *wuxing* (五行 / "Five Phases"). Rather than Western concepts of elemental magic, Chinese phases are more commonly used to describe the interactions and relationships between things. The phases can both beget and overcome each other.

- Wood (木 / mu)
- Fire (火 / huo)
- Earth (土 / tu)
- Metal (金 / jin)
- Water (水 / shui)

Flowers:

LOTUS: Associated with Buddhism. It rises untainted from the muddy waters it grows in, and thus symbolizes ultimate purity of the heart and mind.

PINE (TREE): A symbol of evergreen sentiment / everlasting affection.

PLUM (BLOSSOMING TREE): A symbol of endurance, as it blooms in the depths of winter. The plum blossom is also one of the four flowers of the ideal Confucian gentleman.

WILLOW (TREE): A symbol of lasting affection and friendship. Also is a symbol of farewell and can mean “urging someone to stay.” “Meeting under the willows” can connote a rendezvous.

FUNERALS: Daoist or Buddhist funerals generally last for forty-nine days. It is a common belief that souls of the dead return home on the night of the sixth day after their death. There are different rituals depending on the region regarding what is done when the spirit returns, but generally they are all intended to guide the spirit safely back to the family home without getting lost; these rituals are generally referred to by the umbrella term "Calling the Spirit on the Seventh Day."

During the funeral ceremony, mourners can present the deceased with offerings of food, incense, and joss paper. If deceased ancestors have no patrilineal descendants to give them offerings, they may starve in the afterlife and become hungry ghosts. Wiping out a whole family is punishment for more than just the living.

After the funeral, the coffin is nailed shut and sealed with paper talismans to protect the body from evil spirits. The deceased is transported in a procession to their final resting place, often accompanied by loud music to scare off evil spirits. Cemeteries are usually on hillsides; the higher a grave is located, the better the feng shui. The traditional mourning color is white.

GHOST: Ghosts (鬼) are the restless spirits of deceased sentient creatures. Ghosts produce yin energy and crave yang energy. They come in a variety of types: they can be malevolent or helpful, can retain their former personalities or be fully mindless, and can actively try to interact with the living world to achieve a goal or be little more than a remnant shadow of their former lives.

Water ghosts are a notable subset of ghosts. They are drowned humans that haunt the place of their death and seek to drag unsuspecting victims underwater to possess their bodies, steal their identities, and take their places in the world of the living. The victim then becomes a water ghost themselves and repeats the process by hunting new victims. This process is known as 替身 / *tishen* (lit. "substitution"). In *Heaven Official's*

Blessing, there is a clear story parallel between the behavior of water ghosts and the birth and actions of Ship-Sinking Black Water.

GUQIN: A seven-stringed zither, played by plucking with the fingers. Sometimes called a qin. It is fairly large and is meant to be laid flat on a surface or on one's lap while playing.

GU SORCERY: The concept of gu (蛊 / "poison") is common in wuxia and xianxia stories. In more realistic settings, it may refer to crafting poisons that are extracted from venomous insects and creatures. Things like snakes, toads, and bugs are generally associated with the idea of gu, but it can also apply to monsters, demons, and ghosts. The effects of gu poison are bewitchment and manipulation. "Swayed by gu" has become a common phrase meaning "lost your mind/been led astray" in modern Chinese vocabulary.

HAND GESTURES: The baoquan (抱拳 / "hold fist") is a martial arts salute where one places their closed right fist against their open left palm. The gongshou (拱手 / "arch hand") is a more generic salute not specific to martial artists, where one drapes their open left palm over their closed right fist. The orientation of both of these salutes is reversed for women. During funerals, the closed hand in both salutes switches, where men will use their left fist and women their right.

HAND SEALS: Refers to various hand and finger gestures used by cultivators to cast spells, or used while meditating. A cultivator may be able to control their sword remotely with a hand seal.

HEAVENLY CAVES AND BLESSED LANDS: Refers to a collection of sacred sites in Daoism. There are said to be ten large caves, thirty-six small caves, and seventy-two blessed lands in existence. They are places with excellent feng shui and are therefore flourishing with life and rich in spiritual energy/qi. These sites are ideal training spots for cultivators who seek to achieve immortality or heavenly ascension.

HEAVENLY REALM: An imperial court of enlightened beings. Some hold administrative roles, while others watch over and protect a specific aspect of the celestial and mortal realm, such as love, marriage, a piece of land, etc. There are also carefree immortals who simply wander the world and help mortals as they go, or become hermits deep in the mountains.

HEAVENLY TRIBULATION: Before a Daoist cultivator can ascend to the heavens, they must go through a trial known as a Heavenly Tribulation. In stories where the heavens are depicted with a more traditional nine-level structure, even gods themselves must endure and overcome tribulations if they want to level up. The nature of these trials vary, but the most common version involves navigating a powerful lightning storm. To fail means losing one’s attained divine stage and cultivation.

HUALIAN: Shortened name for the relationship between Hua Cheng and Xie Lian.

IMMORTALS AND IMMORTALITY: Immortals have transcended mortality through cultivation. They possess long lives, are immune to illness and aging, and have various magical powers. An immortal can progress to godhood if they pass a Heavenly Tribulation. The exact life span of immortals differs from story to story, and in some they only live for three or four hundred years.

IMMORTAL-BINDING ROPES: Ropes, nets, and other restraints enchanted to withstand the power of an immortal or god. They can only be cut by high-powered spiritual items or weapons and usually limit the abilities of those trapped by them.

INCENSE TIME: A common way to tell time in ancient China, referring to how long it takes for a single incense stick to burn. Standardized incense sticks were manufactured and calibrated for specific time measurements: a half hour, an hour, a day, etc. These were available to people of all social classes.

In *Heaven Official's Blessing*, the incense sticks being referenced are the small sticks one offers when praying at a shrine, so "one incense time" is roughly thirty minutes.

INEDIA: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired.

JADE: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting both decorative and functional pieces alike have made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might cause Westerners to think of green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite). This is the color referenced when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade." Other colors of jade will usually be specified in the text.

JADE EMPEROR: In Daoist cosmology, the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝) is the emperor of heaven, the chief of the heavenly court, and one of the highest ranked gods in the heavenly realm, lower only to the three primordial emanations. When one says "Oh god/lord" or "My heavens," it is usually referring to the Jade Emperor. In *Heaven Official's Blessing*, Jun Wu's role replaces that of the Jade Emperor.

JOSS PAPER: Also referred to as ghost paper, joss paper is a form of paper crafting used to make offerings to the deceased. The paper can be folded into various shapes and is burned as an offering, allowing the deceased person to utilize the gift the paper represents in the realm of the dead. Common gifts include paper money, houses, clothing, toiletries, and dolls to act as the deceased's servants.

KOWTOW: The *kowtow* (叩头 / “knock head”) is an act of prostration where one kneels and bows low enough that their forehead touches the ground. A show of deep respect and reverence that can also be used to beg, plead, or show sincerity.

MERIDIANS: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL: Zhongqiu Jie (中秋節), or the Mid-Autumn Festival, falls on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the Lunar Calendar. It typically falls around September-October on the Western Calendar. This festival is heavily associated with reunions, both family and otherwise. Mooncakes—also known as reunion cakes, as they are meant to be shared—are a popular food item associated with this festival. Much like the Shangyuan Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival involves the lighting of lanterns to worship the heavens. It is also commonly associated with courtship and matchmaking.

Numbers

TWO: Two (二 / “er”) is considered a good number and is referenced in the common idiom “good things come in pairs.” It is common practice to repeat characters in pairs for added effect.

THREE: Three (三 / “san”) sounds like *sheng* (生 / “living”) and also like *san* (散 / “separation”).

FOUR: Four (四 / “si”) sounds like *si* (死 / “death”). A very unlucky number.

SEVEN: Seven (七 / “qi”) sounds like *qi* (齊 / “together”), making it a good number for love-related things. However, it also sounds like *qi* (欺 / “deception”).

EIGHT: Eight (八 / “ba”) sounds like *fa* (發 / “prosperity”), causing it to be considered a very lucky number.

NINE: Nine (九 / “jiu”) is associated with matters surrounding the Emperor and Heaven, and is as such considered an auspicious number.

MXTX’s work has subtle numerical theming around its love interests. In *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, her second book, Lan Wangji is frequently called Lan-er-gege (“second brother Lan”) as a nickname by Wei Wuxian. In her third book, *Heaven Official’s Blessing*, Hua Cheng is the third son of his family and gives the name San Lang (“third youth”) when Xie Lian asks what to call him.

PHOENIX: *Fenghuang* (凤凰 / “phoenix”), a legendary chimeric bird said to only appear in times of peace and to flee when a ruler is corrupt. They are heavily associated with femininity, the Empress, and happy marriages.

PILLS AND ELIXIRS: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these things are usually delivered in pill form. These pills are created in special kilns.

PLAGUES AND DISEASE: In ancient China, plagues and pandemics were considered to be the work of demons or other evil creatures, and were thought to be karmic punishment from the heavens for humanity's evil deeds. It was thought that the gods would protect the righteous and innocent from catching the disease, and mass repentance was the only way to "cure" or banish a plague for good. When the gods determined the punishment served to be sufficient, they would descend and drive out the plague-causing demons.

This outlook is why Human Face Disease is considered in-universe to be a mark against the Kingdom of Xianle's morality and a mark against Xie Lian as both a leader and a god—the plague only affecting Xianle is "proof" that they angered the heavens, and Xie Lian being unable to cure it by his own power is "proof" that he does not have heaven's blessing and is not a true god.

PRIMORDIAL SPIRIT: The essence of one's existence beyond the physical. The body perishes, the soul enters the karmic wheel, but the spirit that makes one unique is eternal.

RELIGIOUS ICONOGRAPHY AND CAVES: It is not uncommon to find religious iconography in cave networks, as caves have long been used as places of secluded meditation for followers of Daoist or Buddhist faiths.

The Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves and the Tianlongshan Grottoes are extreme examples of this practice, containing hundreds of religious murals and over a thousand divine statues.

STEP-LITTER: (步輦) a “litter” is a type of wheelless vehicle. Palanquins and sedan chairs are in the same category of human-powered transport, but they often have boxed cabins. A step-litter is an open-air platform with a seat/throne atop it, often with a canopy of hanging silk curtains for privacy. Step-litters are usually reserved for those with high status.

QI: *Qi* (气) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with lush wildlife are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons or sending out blasts of energy to do powerful damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to feel for potential danger.

QI CIRCULATION: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact and can heal someone who is wounded if the donor is trained in the art.

QIANKUN: *Qiankun* can be translated to “universe.” Qiankun pouches (乾坤袋) or Qiankun sleeves (乾坤袖) are containers that are bigger on the inside, used to easily carry cargo a person normally couldn’t manage. Qiankun items are common in fantasy settings.

RED STRING OF FATE: Refers to the myth in many East Asian cultures that an invisible red string connects two individuals who are fated to be lovers. The string is tied at each lover’s finger (usually the middle finger or pinky finger).

SECT: A cultivation sect is an organization of individuals united by their dedication to the practice of a particular method of cultivation or martial arts. A sect may have a signature style. Sects are led by a single leader, who is supported by senior sect members. They are not necessarily related by blood.

SEVEN APERTURES/QIQIAO: (七窍) The seven facial apertures: the two eyes, two nostrils, mouth, and two ears. The essential qi of vital organs are said to connect to the seven apertures, and illness in the vital organs may cause symptoms there. People who are ill or seriously injured may be “bleeding from the seven apertures.”

SHANGYUAN: Shangyuan Jie (上元節), or the Lantern Festival, marks the fifteenth and last day of the Lunar New Year (usually around February on the Solar Calendar). It is a day for worshipping and celebrating the celestial heavens by hanging lanterns, solving riddles, and performing Dragon Dances. Glutinous rice ball treats known as yuanxiao and tangyuan are highlights of this festival, so much so that the festival’s alternate name is Yuanxiao Jie (元宵節).

SHRINES: Shrines are sites at which an individual can pray or make offerings to a god, spirit, or ancestor. They contain an object of worship to focus on such as a statue, a painting or mural, a relic, or a memorial tablet in the case of an ancestral shrine. The term also refers to small roadside shrines or personal shrines to deceased family members or loved ones kept on a mantle. Offerings like incense, food, and money can be left at a shrine as a show of respect.

SPIRIT BANNER: A banner or flag intended to guide spirits. Can be hung from a building or tree to mark a location or carried around on a staff.

STATE PRECEPTOR: State preceptors, or guoshi, are high-ranking government officials who also have significant religious duties. They serve as religious heads of state under the emperor and act as the tutors, chaplains, and confidants of the emperor and his direct heirs.

SWORDS: A cultivator’s sword is an important part of their cultivation practice. In many instances, swords are spiritually bound to their owner and may have been bestowed on them by their master or a family member, or obtained through a ritual. Cultivators in fiction are able to use their swords as transportation by standing atop the flat of the blade and riding it as it flies through the air. Skilled cultivators can summon their swords to fly into their hand, command the sword to fight on its own, or release energy attacks from the edge of the blade.

SWORD GLARE: Jianguang (剑光 / “sword light”), an energy attack released from a sword’s edge.

SWORN BROTHERS/SISTERS/FAMILIES: In China, sworn brotherhood describes a binding social pact made by two or more unrelated individuals. Such a pact can be entered into for social, political, and/or personal reasons. It was most common among men but was not unheard of among women or between people of different genders.

The participants treat members of each other’s families as their own and assist them in the ways an extended family would: providing mutual support and aid, support in political alliances, etc. Sworn siblings will refer to themselves as brother or sister, but this is not to be confused with familial relations like blood siblings or adoption. It is sometimes used in Chinese media, particularly danmei, to imply romantic relationships that could otherwise be prone to censorship.

TALISMANS: Strips of paper with spells written on them, often with cinnabar ink or blood. They can serve as seals or be used as one-time spells.

THE THREE REALMS: Traditionally, the universe is divided into Three Realms: the **Heavenly Realm**, the **Mortal Realm**, and the **Ghost Realm**. The Heavenly Realm refers to the Heavens and Celestial Court, where gods reside and rule, the Mortal Realm refers to the human world, and the Ghost Realm refers to the realm of the dead.

VINEGAR: To say someone is drinking vinegar or tasting vinegar means they're having jealous or bitter feelings. Generally used for a love interest growing jealous while watching the main character receive the attention of a rival suitor.

WEDDING TRADITIONS: Red is an important part of traditional Chinese weddings, as the color of prosperity, happiness, and good luck. It remains the standard color for bridal and bridegroom robes and wedding decorations even today. During the ceremony, the couple each cut off a lock of their own hair, then intertwine and tie the two locks together to symbolize their commitment.

WHISK: A whisk held by a cultivator is not a baking tool but a Daoist symbol and martial arts weapon. Usually made of horsehair bound to a wooden stick, the whisk is based off a tool used to brush away flies without killing them and is symbolically meant for wandering Daoist monks to brush away thoughts that would lure them back to secular life. Wudang Daoist Monks created a fighting style based on wielding it as a weapon.

YAO: Animals, plants, or objects that have gained spiritual consciousness due to prolonged absorption of qi. Especially high-level or long-lived yao are able to take on a human form. This concept is comparable to Japanese yokai, which is a loanword from the Chinese yao. Yao are not evil by nature but often come into conflict with humans for various reasons, one being that the cores they develop can be harvested by human cultivators to increase their own abilities.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy can do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever they lack.

ZHANMADAO: A large, two-handed bladed weapon that was designed to counter cavalry units.

ZHONGYUAN: Zhongyuan Jie (中元節), or the Ghost Festival / Hungry Ghost Festival, falls on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Lunar Calendar (this usually falls around August/September on the Solar

Calendar). The festival celebrates the underworld, and offerings are made to the dead to appease their spirits and help them move on.

Footnotes

1. Fangxin [芳心] means “Affections of a Young Woman.” Zhuxin [誅心] means “Intent to Execute” or “Executed Heart.”

2. An idiom meaning that one is in a bad or hopeless situation

3. [養不教，父之過。] “Feeding without teaching is the father’s failing.” From the fifth verse of the Three Character Classic, a text for young children that explained Confucian morals while teaching reading and vocabulary. This line stresses a father’s duty to teach their children, not just provide for them.

4. “Supreme” (绝 / jue), derived from “unrivaled” (绝世 / jueshi) and “pinnacle” (绝顶 / jueding).

5. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng have both been using the respectful pronoun for “you” throughout their interaction with Mei Nianqing. Hua Cheng does not use respectful speech toward anyone other than Xie Lian and Mei Nianqing.

6. It is a Chinese folk belief that a cheap, vulgar life will last longer.

About the Author

“A young superstitious girl,
renowned poster of memes;
a gourmet world goof, who takes photos with shaky hands;
and types cursedly slow, finishing stories depending on the mood.
...All lies.

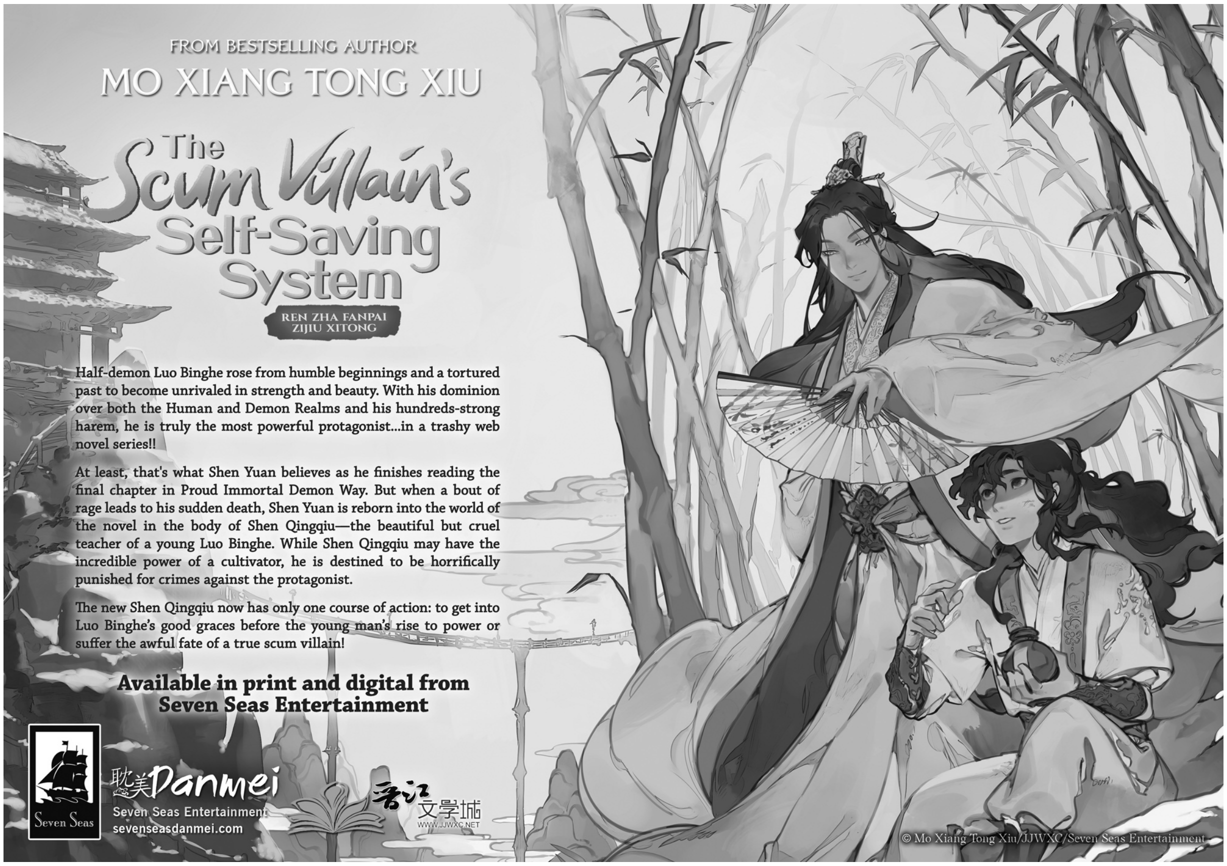
I actually enjoy a refreshing cup of tea in the afternoon, staring into the far-off distance as I open my beloved notebook to write poetry.

...No, no, no, that’s even more of a lie.

All right, actually, I'm just someone
who writes.

Yep.”

Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (MXTX) is a globally renowned author whose works are often cited as the best-known in the modern danmei genre. Originally self-published via the novel serialization website, JJWXC, her current titles include *The Scum Villain’s Self-Saving System, Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *Heaven Official’s Blessing*. All three series have received multiple adaptations and have been published in numerous languages around the world.



FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MO XIANG TONG XIU

The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System
REN ZHA FANPAI ZIJIU XITONG

Half-demon Luo Binghe rose from humble beginnings and a tortured past to become unrivaled in strength and beauty. With his dominion over both the Human and Demon Realms and his hundreds-strong harem, he is truly the most powerful protagonist...in a trashy web novel series!!

At least, that's what Shen Yuan believes as he finishes reading the final chapter in Proud Immortal Demon Way. But when a bout of rage leads to his sudden death, Shen Yuan is reborn into the world of the novel in the body of Shen Qingqiu—the beautiful but cruel teacher of a young Luo Binghe. While Shen Qingqiu may have the incredible power of a cultivator, he is destined to be horrifically punished for crimes against the protagonist.

The new Shen Qingqiu now has only one course of action: to get into Luo Binghe's good graces before the young man's rise to power or suffer the awful fate of a true scum villain!

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FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MO XIANG TONG XIU

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation
MO DAO ZU SHI

Wei Wuxian was once one of the most outstanding men of his generation, a talented and clever young cultivator who harnessed martial arts, knowledge, and spirituality into powerful abilities. But when the horrors of war led him to seek a new power through demonic cultivation, the world's respect for his skills turned to fear, and his eventual death was celebrated throughout the land.

Years later, he awakens in the body of an aggrieved young man who sacrifices his soul so that Wei Wuxian can exact revenge on his behalf. Though granted a second life, Wei Wuxian is not free from his first, nor the mysteries that appear before him now. Yet this time, he'll face it all with the righteous and esteemed Lan Wangji at his side, another powerful cultivator whose unwavering dedication and shared memories of their past will help shine a light on the dark truths that surround them.

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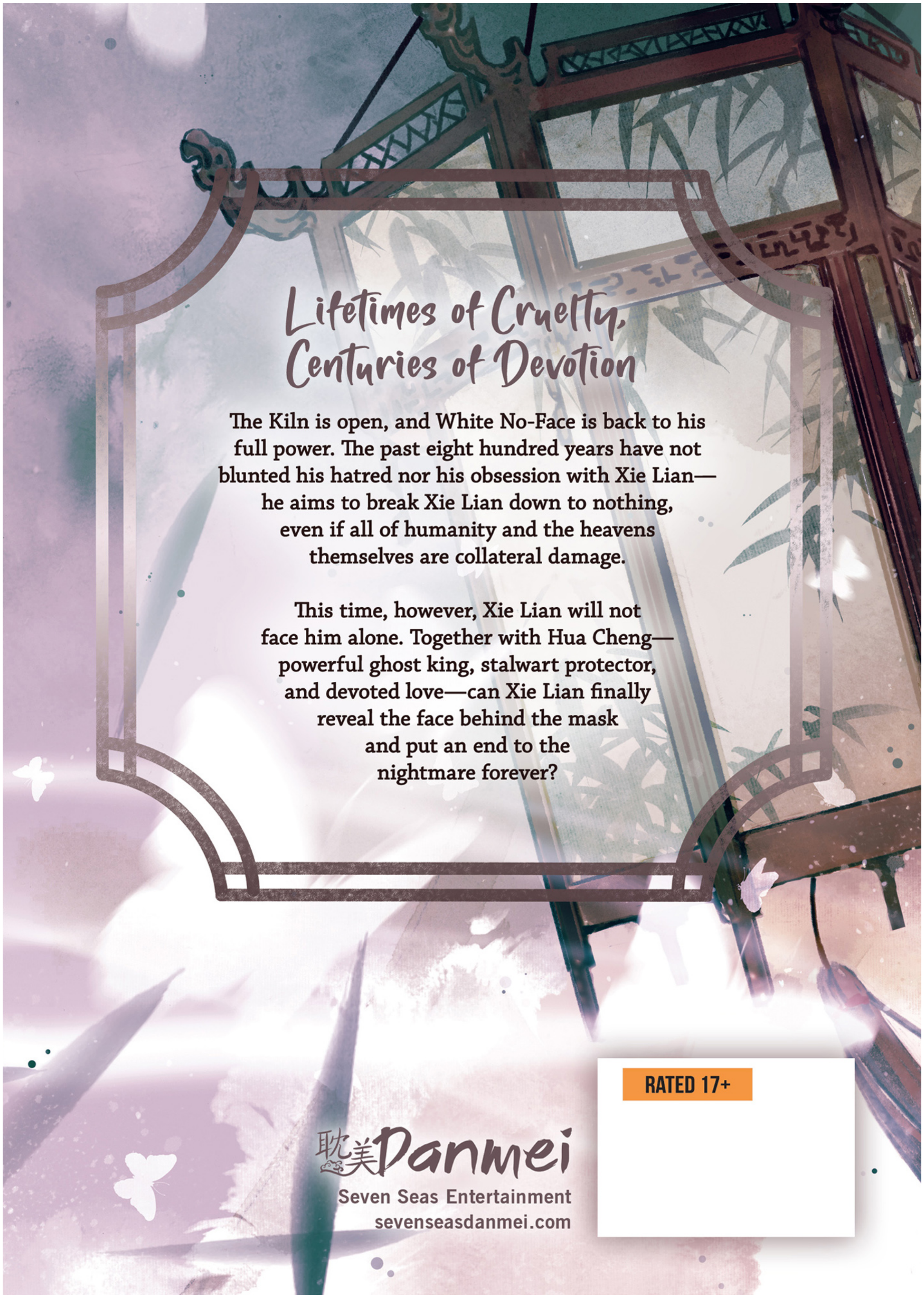

Lifetimes of Cruelty, Centuries of Devotion

The Kiln is open, and White No-Face is back to his full power. The past eight hundred years have not blunted his hatred nor his obsession with Xie Lian—he aims to break Xie Lian down to nothing, even if all of humanity and the heavens themselves are collateral damage.

This time, however, Xie Lian will not face him alone. Together with Hua Cheng—powerful ghost king, stalwart protector, and devoted love—can Xie Lian finally reveal the face behind the mask and put an end to the nightmare forever?

RATED 17+

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